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Reconsidering Essence: A Neuro-Cognitive Understanding  
of the Recognition of Adaptations

Christopher T. Althoff

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Reconsidering Essence: A Neuro-Cognitive Understanding of the Recognition of Adaptations

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The rhetorical core of adaptation studies is a comparison between two texts, and the type of comparison that has sparked the most reactions, whether in its use or in speaking out against it, is fidelity criticism. As David Johnson and Simone Murray point out, fidelity criticism has long been rejected as an unscholarly mode of interpretative analysis because it is caught up in subjective value judgments and imprecise conjectures of a text's "essence." I contend, however, that the understanding of essences is critical to understanding both fidelity and the adaptation experience because something like essence is fixed in the human consciousness. Recent research in neuro-studies suggests that the mind creates "essences" by recognizing networks of structural elements in objects (namely texts for the purposes of this paper). The essence then becomes an experienced-based abstraction that can be recalled whenever useful. The individual is able to use the abstraction the mind creates to interpret the world, including the object itself, other objects, and the relationship all those objects have with him/herself, the individual. That relationship, in turn, influences and changes both the object and the individual interpreting the object. Thus the concept of a text's essence, though often disregarded, becomes a useful interpretative tool when understood through a combination of overlapping theoretical traditions. Combining a reception-based structural and Heideggerian utilitarianism with recent neuroscientific findings grants productive insights clarifying our understandings and definitions of essence, especially in regard to adaptations in particular.

Keywords: adaptation, fidelity, essence, phenomenology, cognitive science, neuroscience, global judgments, memory

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## Reconsidering Essence

The rhetorical core of adaptation studies is a comparison between two texts, and the type of comparison that has sparked the most reactions, whether in its use or in speaking out against it, is fidelity criticism. As David Johnson and Simone Murray point out, fidelity criticism has long been rejected as an unscholarly mode of interpretative analysis because it is caught up in subjective value judgments and imprecise conjectures of a text's "essence." But despite its rejection, fidelity continues to be brought forward as the proverbial whipping boy (Johnson 92) or serial villain of adaptation studies—to forever be invoked just to get knocked back down again and again. After reading decades worth of adaptation criticism, Simone Murray noted that "in academic circles the ritual slaying of fidelity criticism at the outset of a work has ossified into a habitual gesture, devoid of any real intellectual challenge" (6). The need adaptation scholars feel to continually point out the nescient—though more likely guileless—appeal to fidelity has itself become a redundant, unsophisticated act. But why has the ceremonial execution of fidelity become the Sisyphean task of adaptation studies, the theoretical embodiment of Chumbawamba's song "Tubthumping"?

Robert Stam suggests that "the very violence of the term [fidelity] gives expression to the intense disappointment we feel when a film adaptation fails to capture what we see as the fundamental narrative, thematic, and aesthetic features of its literary source" (3). As is exemplified by Stam's use of the word "violence" to describe infidelity to what is perceived the fundamental essence of a text, scholars like Linda Hutcheon have pointed out the "morally loaded discourse" (7) and "profoundly moralistic rhetoric" (85) that comes with the term. Likewise, Glenn Jellenik indicates that unfaithful "adaptations are deemed not merely artistically lacking but ethically corrupt" (46-47). Perhaps the concerns of ethical corruption that Jellenik

suggests come from modern legal concerns of copyright infringement or from holdover Romantic ideals such as originality of the creative genius. Or maybe the moral infringement committed by an unfaithful adaptation is the result of the violation of something more intimate. As this language implies, for many who experience them, adaptations represent promises of the re-creation of a personal experience an individual had with a text, a personal experience that can often be deeply emotional and even engrained in the formation of their self.<sup>i</sup> The personal nature of the reception of adaptations means the fidelity concept will never go away. We can't get rid of it, nor should we want to. "Fidelity" speaks to the heart of experiencing adaptations. It is the first reaction that invites both novice and expert to begin comparing texts. It is the introduction to all things adaptation. So rather than continuing to try and kill the ever-living, undead concept that is fidelity, we should make greater efforts to understand how it functions as part of the textual experience and why it is so enduring. One of the goals of this paper, then, is to reconsider how our phenomenological experiences with texts, including adaptations, contribute to a fidelity reaction.

With the proliferation of children's books and young adult novels turned into films, as well as the influx of remakes and lengthy franchise series over the past decade, the experience of viewing and perceiving texts as adaptations is, safe to say, all but universal in Western culture. But despite its universality, the adaptation experience remains personal, dependent on factors tied directly to the individual. A recent approach aimed at better understanding adaptations has emerged that moves away from focusing on the connections between texts and towards the affective influence of multiple texts on the recipient. Kathryn Meeks and Dennis Cutchins point out that Linda Hutcheon's definition of adaptations seems to be reception based, centering "the perception, and perhaps the definition, of adaptation not on the texts in question, but squarely



with the one having the experience, the one in whose memory at least two texts exist simultaneously” (301). Cutchins and Meeks’ observation highlights two important aspects of adaptations. First, viewing or reading adaptations is an experience, and I will add that it is an experience distinct from the experience with other texts precisely for the second aspect Cutchins and Meeks point out: part of the adaptation experience happens distinctly in the memory of an individual. This type of experience depends on the individual simultaneously recalling one text while experiencing another. The adaptation experience is thus an ad hoc act of what I will call interpretive remembrance. That is, the active comparison of the individual’s memory of one text while experiencing a second. The individual interprets the present text while remembering the formerly experienced text, influencing the way the present text is understood and later remembered.

The initial response of interpretive remembrance is isolated in the mind of the individual who must then decide how to express that personal experience. When talking about a text like *Frankenstein*, for instance, the individual must first re-create the initial text, selecting and summarizing the key plot, character, and thematic elements of Mary Shelley’s novel. Then he/she must select and describe the relevant parts in an adaptation like the film *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994). And finally, the individual re-creates for his/her audience the experience of the instance of remembering one text while experiencing the second—thinking about and comparing *Frankenstein* the novel while watching the film based on it. Though not necessarily a conscious act, the concept of interpretive remembrance suggests that the adaptation experience consists of an individual drawing from their own memory and re-creating the multiple texts that are connected as adaptations. In other words, when an individual recognizes and experiences a

text as an adaptation, emphasis is placed on his/her versions of the texts as well as his/her experiences with them.

In an attempt to better understand a few of the elements that contribute to the adaptation experience, Dennis Cutchins and I performed a study across 2018 and 2019 exploring suppositions central to adaptation studies. Our goal was to measure the effects of the order of encounter and of time between exposure to the two parts of an adaptation pair as well as how textual mediums affect the memory. While the data we collected were fruitful in gaining further insight into those concepts, we were surprised to find unexpected evidence that seemed to support one of the key notions dismissed by the adaptation scholars who have long rejected the value and practicality of fidelity as integral to the adaptation experience: the idea that a text has an essence.

The understanding of essences is critical to understanding fidelity and the adaptation experience because something like essence is fixed in the human consciousness. Recent research in neuro-studies suggests that the mind creates “essences” by recognizing networks of structural elements in objects (namely texts for the purposes of this paper). These elements then form an essence or an experienced-based abstraction that can be recalled whenever useful. The individual is able to use the abstraction the mind creates to interpret the object itself, other objects, and the relationship he or she has with all of these “texts.” That relationship influences and changes both the object and the individual interpreting the object. The concept of a text’s essence, though often disregarded, becomes a useful interpretative tool when understood through a combination of overlapping theoretical traditions. Combining a reception-based structural and Heideggerian utilitarianism with recent neuroscientific findings grants productive insights clarifying our understandings and definitions of essence.

One of the most difficult aspects of studying “essence,” though, is the ambiguous nature of the term itself. Everyone who decides to wrestle or respond to the term has a slightly different understanding and usage of the word. Over the course of this paper, I will engage with and try to clarify the different connotations of “essence,” especially within the field of adaptations in particular, as well as define the types of essences I explore here.

But before diving any deeper into a discussion on essence, let me explain how I arrived at the topic. As I mentioned, Dennis Cutchins and I decided to create a study. In that study, we shared with participants a short story and/or a short film based on that story, mixing the order the subjects encountered the two works. Those works were a short story by Anton Chekhov translated into English and a short film created by students in Brigham Young University’s theatre and film department. Based on these two texts, we then created a survey intended to measure the degree to which perception of the second text was influenced by exposure to the first text. In Chekhov’s 1886 realist short story “Toska,” translated as “Misery,” Iona Potapov, a cab or “sledge” driver in St. Petersburg in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, picks up four fares in the course of a winter evening. His first passenger is a lone army officer, and later he gives a ride to three young men on their way from one party to the next. With both the officer and the young men, Iona attempts to discuss the recent death of his son, but no one will listen. At the end of the story, back in the cab yard, Iona explains his misery over his son’s death to his horse.

In the more stylized student film “Heartache,” Iona, now simply called “Driver,” and his wooden puppet horse pick up eight passengers, including a man and a woman and later three couples. As happens in the short story, the driver attempts to discuss the death of his son with all of his passengers. The female passengers in the film are somewhat more sympathetic to him than the male passengers in the short story, but the driver is ultimately prevented from telling his story

by the men in the cab. In the end, as in the short story, the driver is left explaining his grief to the horse—in this case his wooden horse. All the while, vintage black and white images of a wintertime Russian city are projected on screens behind the actors.

Each of the approximately one-hundred participants we recruited for this study was eventually exposed to both of these texts, though the order and the circumstances of the exposure were varied. We began by randomly assigning each subject to one of six groups. For each of these groups we changed the order of encounter with the texts, the time between viewing and reading, and the time before taking the survey. We wrote the survey's questions in an attempt to test subjects' memories of factual information as well as to understand their interpretational impressions. This approach resulted in ten discrete sets of data.

The first two groups of participants acted as our control groups. Group 1 read the short story, then took the survey, and Group 2 watched the short film, then took the survey. The results from these two surveys were our first two datasets against which all other datasets would be compared. While the other eight datasets provided interesting insights into how order of encounter of an adaptation pair and how medium specificity affects memory and reception, for the purpose of discussing fidelity and textual essence, only the first two data sets are relevant.

The first challenge in organizing the study was making sure that our survey's questions allowed for a clear distinction between the two texts. To accomplish this distinction in our analysis, we split the survey into two types of questions: fact-based and interpretive. The fact-based questions tested for general knowledge about the two texts. These types of questions included things like the number of characters, what the protagonist was called, and specific plot events. We tried to include questions that distinguished between the two versions so that we could tell if subjects were basing their answers on one text more than the other. For example, the

protagonist is named Iona Potapov in the written text but simply called “Driver” in the film. If subjects remembered the main character’s name, then we could assume that they were basing their answers on the written text more than on the film. The interpretive questions, for which there were no clear right or wrong answers, were included to see if the answers to these questions would correlate to the way participants answered the fact questions. These included questions like, “Why doesn’t the main character seem concerned about the fares he is paid?” and “Why doesn’t anyone listen to the main character?” With these questions, we hoped to see if exposure to one text or the other would inspire a particular impression or interpretation.

Since participants who had experienced both texts were cognizant of the fact that they could answer the survey questions based on the written text *or* the film, we provided a final open-ended question that allowed them to explain why they chose to answer one way or the other.

We were happy to find that our control datasets were obviously distinguishable, at least in terms of the way subjects answered the fact-based questions. There was a distinct separation between those who had only read the written text and those who had only watched the film. This distinction allowed us to compare all the other datasets to the control groups to see if the results of the study’s different iterations favored one text over the other. But while the fact-based questions presented a nice discrimination, the interpretive questions did not.

The responses to the interpretive questions were more evenly split across several answers in similar distributions for both Datasets 1 and 2. We were initially disappointed to see that the interpretive questions failed to distinguish the two texts, believing that our failure to write discriminating questions had caused a lack of distinction. But then an article by neuroscientist Marta Straga and her colleagues described exactly what we found. In her 2017 article, Straga, et

al. described a distinction between what they call “memory-based” judgments and “global” judgements. Memory-based judgments, they found, depend on what might be called just the facts—the observable, recordable phenomena. Memory judgments are concerned with specific events and objects, while global judgments, on the other hand, are formed by “impression[s] about an experience or a person” (Straga 2). We consequently realized that our fact-based questions demanded memory-based judgments, while our interpretive questions tended to rely on global judgments. What we learned, in short, and what Straga and her colleagues discovered, is that impressions about a person or a situation, in contrast to questions about more straightforward details, are not particularly dependent upon explicit memories and facts. A person’s impressions about me, in other words, are based less on exactly the clothes I have worn in the past or the words I have spoken, and more on a gestalt, a gut feeling about what I am like. The surprising thing about this finding in our data is that subjects who only watched the film and subjects who only read the short story had amazingly similar impressions or global judgements about the main character and his passengers. This conclusion remained true across all the datasets. This finding was unexpected but intriguing. It suggested something that flies in the face of the conventional scholarly wisdom of the adaptation studies field. References to a film’s or a written text’s “essence” are problematic, to say the least. But the concept of global judgments might indicate something like an essence that exists independently of the medium of an adaptation.

The concept of an essence within a text has been generally dismissed in adaptation studies as an overly simplified and generally impractical term. It has been long used in conjunction with adaptation studies’ concept of fidelity, implying that to be faithful to an original text, the adapted text must capture the unique essence that makes the original text what it is.

Explaining this unique essence, Stam says, “it is assumed, [that] there is an originary core, a kernel of meaning or nucleus of events that can be ‘delivered’ by an adaptation” (57). The very notion of fidelity suggests the concept of an ideal version of an object that reflects the long tradition of “essence” originating with Plato and Aristotle. The popular, contemporary opinion has been that essence is not worth consideration because it is still tied up with the idea that the essence of a text is “singular” rather than the more modern perception of essences being negotiated by an individual’s experience-based interpretation.<sup>ii</sup> As Thomas Leitch puts it, “Even the most resolute attempt at fidelity to the text is compromised, as usual, by the fact that there is always more than one text to be faithful to” (201). “More than one text,” Leitch says, meaning that each interpretation of a text can be considered a different version. Even the study’s co-investigator Dennis Cutchins at one point wrote as late as 2010, “There is no such thing as an abstractable (extractable) ‘essence’ in a novel or film that can be adapted to a new medium so that one may say, ‘It’s the same story, it’s just told in a different way.’ Any ‘retelling’ of a story is a new story because the text has been interpreted by the ‘reteller’” (Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins 18). If every individual creates a personally unique essence for every text based on his/her hermeneutic experience, there would be a potentially infinite number of essences for any given text, and it would therefore be an overwhelmingly impossible task to take into account all possible essences when analyzing adaptations.

A text’s essence, however, is not quite as nebulous and ephemeral as the infinity-essence hypothesis would make it appear. A text’s essence is pulled and shaped by what we might call the cultural gravitational mass of more than the hermeneutic experiences of an individual. Any individual experience is tied to a certain time and place in that person’s life, creating very personal (as well as cultural) forces that act on the reception of the text. Yet while these

contextual forces influence the way we receive, interpret, understand, and remember texts<sup>iii</sup>, it cannot be ignored that there are still structural elements that transcend time and place that contribute to a formal essence. It is that formal essence, the textual essence, that allows us to have common enough experiences with the same text to have a conversation about it.

So essence is in fact singular, but it “is not necessarily a form of reductionism” (Eagleton 99), as scholars like Stam and Leitch have suggested. Rooted in human perception, essence is a complicated ontological and organizational process of recognition and recall that is ultimately handicapped by human communication’s reliance on language. Being the recondite term that it is, it behooves me to give a working definition of essence as I will be using it. Essence represents, I argue, the elements of being that express the intrinsic nature or inherent qualities—including both abstract attributes as well as physical properties—of an object’s character, identifying classifications, and perceived purpose(s). Essence is both physical as well as metaphysical. It depends on an object’s structure as well as on our interactions with and perceptions of that structure. To simplify essence further, and to better suit the purpose for which I use it, I suggest that there are two types of essence: textual essence and memoric essence. The textual essence is a comprehensive structure composed of the narrative and linguistic elements of the observable text. Based on the findings of several neuroscientists, what I call memoric essence is a cognitive structure that reflects and recreates in the mind the textual essence’s observable structure. These two sub-essences show that “essence” is seemingly attached to and a part of the object as well as an object in the mind, allowing for categorical simplification based on a perceived use or relationship with that object. I know a spoon is a spoon because I have experiences with objects that have a concave head attached to a handle. I can place a text like *The Exorcist* into the genre “Horror” because of its textual structure as well as my experiences



with other horror films. Of course, all of the qualities and attributes of an object's essence can fluctuate depending on the context. But the human mind is capable of taking into account those possible fluctuations when organizing its experiences with objects, even if it becomes difficult to express verbally. This difficulty brings about another important aspect of essences. The creation of the memoric essence in the mind is fundamentally an unconscious act. The brain records the structural elements of the textual essence and all their connections behind the scenes mostly involuntarily. The mind does much more in the unconscious than we are able to understand and express. But the process of making a communicable version of a memoric essence or an interpretation of the text is a voluntary, conscious act.

In his look at “the power of our adaptive unconscious” (Gladwell 12), Malcom Gladwell gives a popularized version of global judgments he calls snap judgments. The introduction of Gladwell's book *Blink* summarizes a study done by Nalini Ambady in which she found that students' judgments of a teacher's effectiveness were statistically the same for those who had taken an entire semester with the teacher as for those who were only given a two-second clip of the teacher to watch<sup>iv</sup>. Ambady's study suggests that it is as if there is an essence that good teachers carry and which students can recognize quickly and efficiently without even realizing it. This notion goes against conventional wisdom. As Gladwell points out, “We really only trust conscious decision making” (13). Global judgments, however, are the recognition of situations where memoric essences are applicable, and they therefore bridge the gap between the unconscious (essence) and the conscious (communication of the essence). In other words, global judgments are the conscious reaching into the unconscious to recall and recreate, in the case of adaptations, a textual object in a communicable form.

This recall is possible because the mind is able to turn sequenced events, concepts, objects, and language (including spoken, written, and gestural) into manifestations of “images, motor simulations, empathy, and a rich spectrum of affects—moods, feelings, and emotions” (Collins 16), which can then be recalled in the future as global judgments. The concept of global judgments suggests that much of memory is reduced to experiential, intuitional impressions. Those impressions allow the mind to then “form a content-based generalization (a.k.a. ‘schema’) at the appropriate level of abstraction such that it can be applied to a new problem” (Engle et al. 216) or situation. Anything from concepts such as mathematical processes to objects like texts or even an individual person can be the content that makes the basis for the schema that can then be transferred. This ability to transfer schemas—to abstract a text or experience down to its apparent or perceived essential parts—not only allows us to quickly communicate the premise of a text/experience but also quickly recognize where that transferable abstract is again relevant. In other words, the ability to synthesize this memoric essence I am describing is precisely the ability that allows us to so easily recognize and perceive adaptations and might explain why we enjoy them to the extent that we do.

Transference, that ability to apply knowledge from one situation to another, is a fundamental element of learning. It is how we recognize that we have in fact learned and internalized a concept. For example, answering questions on a test or summarizing in a paper shows that one can recall and apply a piece of knowledge in new contexts. Because we recognize patterns and repetition in order to better understand the world we inhabit, transference is an inherent skill we have as human beings. We are, therefore, predisposed to abstract and transfer everything around us, especially texts. But the ability to abstract a text is both useful and problematic. On the one hand, it allows us to quickly and concisely recognize for ourselves and

communicate to others the important ideas and concepts in, with the case of an adaptation, a text's narrative. On the other hand, abstracting a text runs the risk of oversimplifying and leaving out pivotal elements of that text. Every movie page on IMDb usefully includes a short description, a synopsis or an abstract, that introduces the scenario for the film. More humorously, twitterites use the #ExplainAFilmPlotBadly in making ironic parodies of these abstracts (See Figure 1 and Figure 2 below).



Figure 1. Tweet from @HonestToddler (Bunmi Laditan).



Figure 2. Tweet from @ZombieRiot (Eric Weiss).

You could say that that risk of oversimplification is the price of efficiency. We can't possibly go around referring to stories in explicit detail; it's impractical. So we bundle a narrative up in a

nice little package<sup>v</sup>—what Michael McKeon calls a “simple abstraction” (28)—to smooth out the communication.

A simple abstraction is the creation of a compact, transferable term to unify or simplify (McKeon would say over-simplify, generally) a historically significant and diverse aspect of culture. In his book *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, McKeon uses simple abstraction to describe terms like “romance” (28) and “aristocracy” (169) that categorize genre and class. More recently, Glenn Jellenik points out that “adaptation” itself has become a simple abstraction (37). This unifying and simplifying effect can be applied to more than just terms and ideas; texts themselves can become simple abstractions. We can look to examples of cultural texts like *Frankenstein* or *Sherlock Holmes* whose pervasive influence draws similarly themed and structured texts under their categorical umbrellas. McKeon’s concept of simple abstractions can be used to describe the many genres within literature, film, and other mediums. And with the sheer number of adaptations of the example franchises, “Frankenstein-like” and “Sherlock Holmes-like” could be categorized as genres unto themselves. Within video game communities, labels like “Metroidvania”; “Rogue-like”; and “Souls-like” are already all accepted genres named for the games that inspired them.<sup>vi</sup>The genre names are recognition that it is the games’ structural gameplay elements that unify them into their own categories. The concept can be pushed even further by saying that any text can be considered a simple abstraction. A single text can be used to categorize and unify any other number of texts with similar elements, depending on how one decides to describe their abstractions.

In her dissertation *A New Model for Reading Adaptation: The Textus*, Sarah Davis coins the term “textus” as a strategy to generate a textual essence in a conveyable construction like a simple abstraction. She establishes a formal method of organizing the textual selection and re-

creation process that results from the aforementioned act of interpretive remembrance. The textus—“being ‘the point at which the parts of the structure fit together,’” (Davis 3)—establishes a reader-dependent essence by systematically, and subjectively, distinguishing pivotal elements of multiple versions of a narrative structure. The textus gives agency to the reader “as co-creator in the process of knowledge acquisition when creating the conceptual framework of the textus to use in his/her examination of adaptations” (Davis 10-11). In other words, the reader takes a text someone else has written, selects for themselves the subjectively-chosen most-important parts to create a new, compact, and personal version of that text, and uses that new text (whether written, spoken, or just in the mind) to then examine any and all versions of that text. Davis’ method allows the reader to account for the personal, reception-based nature of the adaptation experience while presenting the texts being analyzed in a format that can be more easily analyzed objectively. With that being said, our experience with adaptations goes beyond how we choose to linguistically encapsulate a text; the adaptation experience gets to the heart of the way in which our brains record and remember narratives or episodic events.

In Morteza Dehghani’s study “Decoding the Neural Representation of Story Meanings across Languages,” the professor of psychology at USC Dornsife and his cohort performed an experiment where participants read a translated version of the same story in their own native language: either English, Mandarin, or Farsi. Collecting the distribution of representations of the story and mapping it out in each subject’s brain, Dehghani then showed that she and her colleagues could find the specific section of the story that one subject was reading by comparing that subject’s results to the data from another subject—even if the subjects’ languages were not the same. This study showed “that neuro-semantic encoding of narrative happens at levels higher than individual semantic units [words and sentences] and that this encoding is systematic across

both individuals and languages” (Dehghani 6096). The brain’s ability to understand and abstract a narrative, in other words, transcends the use of language. This fact means the ability to recognize and record narrative is therefore closer to the understanding of human nature than, as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and its off-shoots would suggest, is language. While language helps us describe our experiences, those experiences are in fact recorded separately from, but most likely intertwined with, the language that later expresses them outwardly. Our consciousness as humans lies in the episodic events we experience, whether first-hand or through the telling of a story. Dehghani remarks that “the brain seems to systematically encode high-level narrative elements” (6098), suggesting that the reason people like to think that texts have essences is because humans think in essences. The brain is able to recognize key characters, settings, and events that allow it to organize them into its memory storage.

Cognitive neuroscientist Branka Milivojevic at Radboud University performed another study looking specifically at the role the hippocampus plays in this memory storage operation. Milivojevic’s study sought to understand how narrative contexts are represented in the brain. She and her collaborators had participants watch a movie with two interwoven narratives while being observed in a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machine. They looked to see if the participants of their study could differentiate between the two narratives in the hippocampus. Milivojevic wanted to see if the mind organized memories in the context of narrative or as a network of related events. The researchers found that “hippocampal neural activity patterns can be used to differentiate between specific locations and characters in the movie... [and their] findings may reflect hierarchical organization within memory, whereby items that appear within individual events may create item-specific ‘context’ in the form of connected networks of events” (Milivojevic 12421). Milivojevic’s findings show that memories aren’t a single mental

object made up of an action with an item in a location. Memories split each of those parts into their own compartments with precise connections to help build the contextual memory that results from all the specific parts and contacts. This understanding of memory means that characters can serve as the item-specific context, and therefore, if a character is the same in a story in different mediums, the mind will use that character as a contextual bridge to connect the memories from each version into a single mental depiction. Iona in “Misery” and the Driver in “Heartache” were recognizably the same character to the participants of our study, just as Gandalf might be equally recognizable in the book and film versions of *The Lord of the Rings*. Milivojevic continues saying, “We showed that the hippocampus codes for nodal representations where activity patterns represent the ‘essence’ of an item in memory, which is common across different events featuring that item” (12423). It seems, in other words, that the mind creates a slot for an item and then interconnects many slots through the events they share. Those “essential” slots and the common elements that connect or uncommon elements that distinguish them can be anything from simply sharing the same name (i.e. Gandalf, Hamlet, Batman, etc.) to sharing more complicated personality traits (i.e., the Driver and Iona). The mind is efficient in being able to sift through and recognize when those common elements are relevant or not, especially when observing works of fiction. Concluding, Milivojevic says, “We also showed that, in addition to item-specific nodal representations within a narrative, the hippocampus also codes for the entire narrative” (12423). In short, Milivojevic is suggesting that the mind processes and create slots for different levels of semantic representation from symbols and language, to people and items, to activities and events, and even to collections of events that combine into a narrative. Each is given its own space or node in the memory; each has its own

memoric essence in the mind. This means that essences for the higher narrative elements—the narrative as a whole, for example—are made up of a network of smaller mental essences.

The different layers of essences that form the memoric essence in the mind reflect the textual essence. Organizing types of sub-essences into different roles allows for the pivotal elements of the text to be split into the two halves into which a textual essence has commonly been separated, what Brian McFarlane calls the “letter” (8)—or the narrative skeleton in Andrew Dudley’s words (31)—and the “spirit,” which constitutes the stylistic elements of the text. It is at the cross section where the “letter” and the “spirit” meet that the text’s textual and memoric essences realize the structures that allow for global judgments.

How the relationship of the “letter” and the “spirit” contributes to creating textual and memoric essences and global judgments can be better understood through Christopher Collins’ take on the figure-and-ground dyad concept. He argues that the figure half of the dyad represents what the mind is focused on. It is the object in the foreground on which attention is concentrated. The ground is everything in the periphery, including the background and other, unimportant (at the given moment) objects. For example, the figure might be the recognition of a familiar face in a crowd of people that is the ground, or the macro-level action of one hand holding an apple (ground) while the other hand performs the micro-level action of peeling it with a knife (figure)<sup>vii</sup>. In the case of McFarlane’s terminology, the “letter” may be considered the figure and the “spirit” the ground. Don Ihde explains that “[p]resented with a visual display, humans can ‘pick out’ some feature which, once chosen, is seen against the variable constant of a field or ground,” (143). Whatever object is the central focus of the person becomes the figure; the rest of the visual field then becomes the ground. Both figure and ground are processed simultaneously, with the ground giving context to the figure. But objects, let alone objects in the foreground,



aren't necessarily the figure. Parts of the ground can become the figure, the point of focus. As part of the background, negative space has no physical form in and of itself (because its form is created by the edge of the physical objects that create its outline), but it can become the figure of focus. Similarly, global judgments are an impressionistic effect within the structures of a textual essence. Global judgments are a part of textual and memoric essences but have no substance themselves. Once the objects creating the edge of the negative space are removed, the negative space then too disappears. Negative space can therefore be considered the boundary where figure and ground meet. The shape that the negative space creates is given structure through the way figures in the foreground interact with the absence of figures in the background. What is visible of the ground then becomes the principal focus. The lack of object becomes the object of attention because it is created by the influence and atmosphere of the surrounding objects.

The mobile game *Polysphere* (2019) gives a metaphorical visualization of how the figure, ground, and negative space all function in conjunction with each other to create the effect that becomes the textual and memoric essence. In *Polysphere*, the player moves and rotates a group of geometric shapes in a 3D space until they align into a unified image (See Figure 2 below).

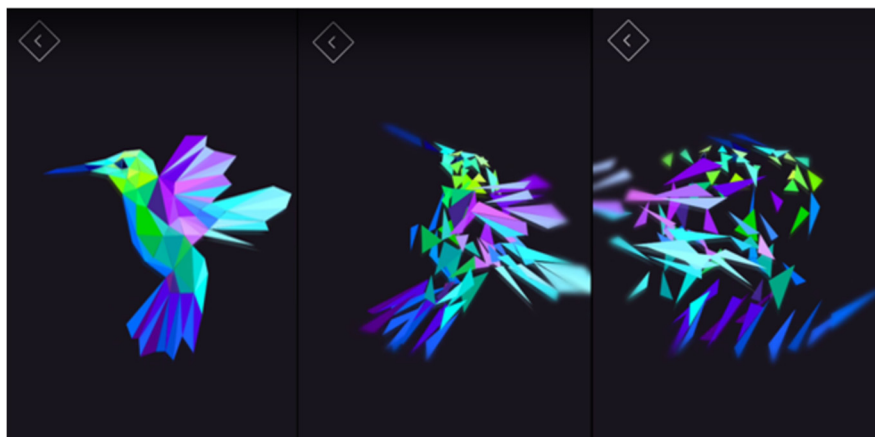


Figure 3. Screen capture from Playgendary, *Polysphere*.

The text as a whole might be understood as the completely put together image on the left, and the different parts of a text's structure—diction, syntax, dialogue, characters, plot, and literary tools like metaphor and allusion—could be represented by the separated geometric pieces in conjunction with the background. A person experiencing the text can move around, isolate, remove, replace, and even morph the structural pieces of the text to expose new and different negative spaces that will create new and unique essences, but the negative spaces are dictated by the pieces available and their relative position to the other shapes. The more someone moves the pieces around the less the form resembles the original structure, but the excess of negative space created allows for more flexibility in defining an essence. Of course, the ground can change, too. The navy blue/black background in the examples above could be changed to a different color, image, or pattern that would also then change the experience of looking at the negative space. Just as a color (like the *Polysphere* background) can be given different symbolic value, the effect the textual “spirit” has can be interpreted in multiple ways. The feel or impression of a text can change depending on the tone and style in which it is portrayed. Just as negative space is the cross-section of the figure and ground, it is the cross-section of the “letter” and “spirit” that essence is formed. Thus, using *Polysphere* as a metaphor for a text's “letter” and “spirit” shows how the structure helps establish the shape and substance of a text that contribute to the global judgments and best stick out in our minds to create a textual essence.

The unchanged global judgments we observed across the data sets in our research could possibly mean multiple things. The first explanation is that the impressions of the two texts fused together in the minds of the participants to create a single background from which they recalled their answers. This explanation cannot account for the similar global judgments of the participants who only experienced one of the texts, but it is still worth considering when trying to

understand how figure and ground help create a textual essence. A second explanation of the unchanged global judgment is that while the figure (being the “letter” or text’s skeleton) is necessary to recognizing two texts as near equivalents, those details are not what give the impression of a character. The narrative details of the texts create the impression of character by enframing it, but they are not the impression itself. The structural elements of the “letter” still rely on the “spiritual” elements to give them substance (what is inside the frame is created by the details that border it), and it just so happens that the two texts we used in the study were able to capture similar enough structural and spiritual elements in their character traits, tone, and values that their audiences came away with the same impressions. Because “Misery” and “Heartache” seemingly both had similar portrayals of the main character, study participants had similar sympathetic sentiments towards each of the two versions of him. In other words, Iona and the Driver are portrayed as sad, old men trying to tell passengers in their sled about their deceased son, and therefore study participants were able to see them as close equivalents. This conjecture is a viable possibility to explain the similar global judgments between the participants who only experienced one of the texts. Different adaptations, intentionally or unintentionally, might or might not capture the same thematic interpretations as their source text or each other. Unfortunately, we cannot confirm or deny this second explanation without further studies into the matter. Lastly, the global impressions could be explained by what the mind then does with the structural shapes and global judgments that it deems important.

The memories and experiences that become the essence(s) of “Misery” and “Heartache” could be made up of the singular sub-essences of Iona/Driver, the driving of a carriage, attempts to talk with passengers, the passengers’ indifference, and a horse. Specific phrases or shots could also become individual essences that eventually interconnect to create the larger textual essences

of short story and film, which are separate yet recognizably joined together. This organizational network of essences allows us to zoom in and out of a text, a pair of texts, or a group of texts, to isolate specific elements and understand how those elements relate to each text as well as how they differ. Neuroscience seems to suggest that the mind is able to instantaneously sift through all the different levels of essence and organize them based on their utility to any given moment or task it finds itself in.

This description of the way the mind makes use of its network of essences echoes the way it makes sense of visual stimuli. In their book *Why We See What We Do*, Dale Purves and R. Beau Lotto describe how the mind distinguishes with just a glance the important objects in its field of vision, or in other words, how it decides what is the figure and ground in a visual field. It turns out that “...the brain evolved to see the world the way it was useful to see in the [individual’s] past” (Purves and Lotto 222). Our species’ brain has evolved such that each individual will adapt to recognize and record how that stimuli has behaved in its experiences with it. What this means is that the way we understand everything we see—colors, objects, spatial approximations, movement trajectory, etc.—is dependent on the outcomes of our past experiences with those stimuli. This influence of accumulated stimuli is the reason why our brains are tricked by and uncomfortable with optical illusions. The way lines and shapes in our line of sight interact with each other gives us information that helps us interpret and interact with the world. But our minds aren’t responding directly to those lines and shapes. Instead, “...what observers actually experience in response to any visual stimulus is its accumulated statistical meaning (i.e., what the stimulus has turned out to signify in the past) rather than the structure of the stimulus in the image plane or its actual source in the present” (226-227). While the present stimulus informs the mind of the possible significance of the elements of the field, that

significance is formed within the context of recognizably similar visual experiences. We see (metaphysically) texts and narratives in a similar fashion. We pick out the most personally useful aspects of the narrative structure based on our past experiences with other similar texts. This suggests that the textual essence (and all its complicated subsidiaries) that is formed in the mind as the memoric essence can be considered the utilitarian purpose an individual sees in that object based on the relationship an object or text has with said individual.

This subject-centered characterization of essence is very Heideggerian. Martin Heidegger did not look at essence as an inherent trait within an object; instead, he believed that the object comes into its essence over time. He used the word *Wesen* to mark this difference from a more classical, platonic sense of essence. William Lovitt, the translator of many of Heidegger's essays, explains that "*Wesen* does not simply mean what something is, but that it means, further, the way in which something pursues its course, the way in which it remains through time as what it is. Heidegger writes elsewhere that the noun *Wesen* does not mean quidditas ['whatness'] originally, but rather 'enduring as presence'" (Heidegger 3n1). Defining essence as "enduring as presence" suggests that the essence of an object or a text is a cumulative effect over the course of its existence. What we see as an object's being is how we relate to it, the uses we see it having. This definition means that the essence of that object can change based on spatial and cultural contexts over the course of time. Wood, for example, can be a building material or fuel, but it depends on context to decide if it be best used as part of a house or as a log in a fire (the shape and structure of the wood would also influence which purpose it would best serve). And there is nothing to say that someone someday won't come up with an entirely new use for wood that changes our perception of its essence. Likewise, a text like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can be considered a failure of clear language, a celebrated work of ambiguity that allows for rich

interpretation, an overt proclamation of racism, and/or a denouncement of Western imperialism (Bloom 17) all depending on context and perspective. When interacting with a text, an individual uses their past personal experiences with other texts to pick out the parts of the new text's textual essence that are most similar to previously-experienced texts' experiences and that have been most useful to the individual in the past (for understanding, comprehension, emotional catharsis, value judgment, and/or critical interpretation). Those most useful parts would then be highlighted in the individual's memoric essence of the text and more likely to be recalled when creating a simple abstraction of the text later on. But just because those most useful sub-essences are what get used in the abstraction does not mean that the other parts of the textual essence did not get recorded.

Understanding memoric essences in this way would suggest that if global judgments help us identify what we perceive as something's textual essence, then global judgments are not based on just a single impression but on an aggregate of impressions and experiences. Global judgments can be seen as a type of intuition about a person, place, or text. And the intuition that drives the global judgments improves with the more information we have to intuit from. Our perception of something is constantly unfolding so that we understand it continuously anew. As we experience a text, every word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph contributes to this evolving impression we have of the text. If we go back and reread it, our understanding of its textual essence will continue to morph with our familiarity with it. The sub-essences that are highlighted in the memoric essence change and become more pronounced. This effect won't stop with the re-reading of an individual text, though. Adaptations show how texts outside the original will also act on each other to change their "Wesen." Every "Misery by Anton Chekhov"-like text will influence the perception of the first text that constitutes the originary experience. Even an

adaptation's slight changes in tone and structure will make the reader understand the text differently. Convincing literary criticism and promotional materials, both examples of paratexts (Cartmell 166), will also affect how we read a text. New life experiences—including understanding new theories, exposure to new cultures, and major life events—can change the way a textual essence is understood, recorded, and recalled. Even the questions we asked the participants in our study may have retroactively changed the way they thought about the text.

Rather than each experience with or about a text being an individual, unique version of that text, as Kyle Meikle suggests—“there is no one source text—no Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, only their..., her..., your..., my..., the first time I read..., and the last time I read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*” (92)—each interaction contributes to the object-network of a text and its adaptations' essence and essences. The memories from those interactions exert forces on the memoric essence that vary in degrees depending on the length of time since the experience occurred as well as the power of the memories' inspirational and emotional impacts. These many forces act on a text's memoric essence, morphing that text into the object as we think of it in the present moment. While, as I mentioned above, the structural aspects contribute to the recognition and interpretation of the text, there is still part of a text's essence that the reader must contribute that allows for a myriad of interpretations. But that myriad is still finite because human experience is finite; it has limits. Meanings and possible interpretations of a text are found within an array or spectrum that is limited and dictated by individual experiences, interpretive communities, and the narrative and medium-specific meaning-making structures of the text. Our mind is able to understand and attribute different interpretations to a single text, keeping and storing them simultaneously together yet separate. Even if we don't yet have a complete understanding of how the process functions, the mind stores objects and experiences with those

objects in an overlapping, interconnected fabric of neural connections that constitute perhaps “not at all an abstract, purified essence; [but] ...a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function” (Barthes 34). This concept—as Barthes calls it, shying away from the term essence—or parts of it, can be recalled and implemented when recognized as useful, and the mind does so seamlessly, with or without need of conscious thought.

The complicated nature of the way in which our brains record everything we have experienced makes it nearly impossible to communicate concepts like textual essences because there is “a certain amount of alienation among human beings [as well as objects, according to Object-Oriented Ontology]” (Cutchins and Meeks 163). The underlying issue that causes this alienation between human beings is the fact that we must use words, which are themselves “unstable” and “nebulous” concepts in our minds. On top of having to use concepts to describe concepts, our language is limited by the fact that it must be expressed linearly—word after word, concept following concept—while the neural network that creates the memoric essence in our mind is a single yet multifaceted object made by a complicated web where any single node can be connected with equal strength to any number of other nodes. As our inefficient language requires us to untangle that web into a simplified version of itself, critics and laypeople are required to succinctly choose the most important structural elements in order to establish a conceptual or essential foundation that connects them with an audience via a textual summary. It is in this simplifying summation that texts become “situated utterances” and “open structures,” (Stam 68) or simple abstracts as I have chosen to call them, to then be interpreted, thus becoming useful.



The recognized usefulness of textual and memoric essences could be one outcome of Rita Felski's goals with her development of post-criticism. A key element of Felski's new approach to textual analysis postulates that "the concern of hermeneutics is neither 'the text itself' nor the lives of readers but the question of where and how the two connect" (Felski 178). Reminiscent of the act of interpretative remembrance, those points of connection where texts and hypertexts meet human experience highlight the relationship between text and reader. Both texts and the brain's organization have structures and forms. When we interact with a text, the text's structures, created by the text's "letter" and "spirit", establish and/or reinforce correlating structures in the mind. Recognizing this relationship between structural elements and interpretational (global) impressions allows us to think of textual essence as a single, complex mental object, the memoric essence, that relates to a physical and metaphysical object in the world. As Felski states, "Reading is now conceived as an act of composition—of creative remaking—that binds text and reader in ongoing struggles, translations, and negotiations" (182). As alluded to while addressing fidelity and applications of reception studies, reading becomes an act of self-creation as well as re-creation. We as the reader are changed by the text, but what we then create from the text—which could be a myriad of formal and informal abstractions emanating from its textual essence—allows us to better understand the social conditions around us, the emotions the text elicits, the changes of perception it prompts, and the bonds and attachments it calls into being (Felski 179). It is up to each reader to decide what is the best way to utilize the text, its many structures, and his/her connections with them.

The influential push and pull of text on reader and reader on text is a new and useful way of thinking. Felski's application of Actor-Network Theory and object-oriented ontology in post-criticism deconstructs the subject-object hierarchy: that subjects act and objects are acted upon.

Subjects no longer have a privileged relationship with objects because we now recognize that objects have an equally discernible effect on the subjects that interact with them. This deconstruction of the subject-object relationship brings to mind Isaac Newton's third law of physics: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. When we act on an object, the force from its mass also acts on us. The pressure of the textual essence on our sensory preceptors shapes the memoric essence in our mind. But as useful as this mode of thought is, I believe that it is still advantageous to consider objects as non-agentic. Taking the mental object of the textual essence and re-objectifying it allows us to use the text as a tool in the interpretations of other textual objects.

We normally treat texts as artifacts to observe and study—taking them apart, sifting through their innards, and scrutinizing each section as if it were an autopsy at the coroner. Texts arrive cold and dead, ready for our scalpel of literary critique. Rather than thinking of the object as the focus of scrutiny, the thing on the autopsy table, we could think of it as the other object in this scenario: the scalpel. The text becomes a tool to utilize in acting on the other object. So rather than the “againstness,” (189) as Felski puts it, of critique's suspicious hermeneutics, and rather than her idea of text as a self-reflective ally—“a spirited and energetic participant in an exchange” (182)—we can use our understanding of one text to help us bring to light new and interesting interpretations of another text. Just as with other tools, there are skills and techniques in manipulating texts to help us accomplish that goal. We can recognize the structural parts—the figure (“letter”), ground (“spirit”), and the negative space between the two (global judgments)—to understand how they affect us as individuals and to use that knowledge to better understand the other texts we experience. The re-objectifying of texts works to help us better understand the way the memoric essences of different texts overlap as well as recognize that we can force them

into contact for valuable outcomes. As Caroline Levine states in her book *Forms*, “Forms may come into productive conflict. The goal, then, is to think about how one might put bounded wholes to work for strategic ends” (37). We can better use texts once we understand how their forms, textual essences, are recorded in our minds and how those mental structures, memoric essences, then influence and are influenced by the disparate structures (cultural as well as textual) that are universally pervasive.

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<sup>i</sup> See Cutchins and Meeks’ treatment of Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* in their article “Adaptation, fidelity and reception” (Cutchins and Meeks 304-5).

<sup>ii</sup> See more from Stam: “...there is no such transferable core: a single novelistic text comprises a series of verbal signals that can generate a plethora of possible readings, including even readings of the narrative itself” (Stam 57).

And also McFarlane: “Fidelity criticism depends on the notion of the text as having an rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct ‘meaning’ which the film maker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with. There will often be a distinction between being faithful to the ‘letter’, an approach which the more sophisticated writer may suggest is no way to ensure a ‘successful’ adaptation, and to the ‘spirit’ or ‘essence’ of the work. The latter is of course very much more difficult to determine since it involves not merely a parallelism between novel and film but between two or more readings of a novel” (McFarlane 8-9).

<sup>iii</sup> Using an insight from Kenneth Burke’s “Art—and the first rough draft of living,” Dennis Cutchins and Katie Meeks explain how personal experiences mix with cultural influences within the act of interpretation: “And here Burke puts his finger on a kind of paradox. The arts, for him, are simultaneously individualized and communal. Through art our human experiences are particularized, and yet that art potentially draws us together. As we identify in families, groups, and communities, we find that we can recognize expressive symbols that are common, and we discover similarities between our experiences. Burke writes, ‘the arts are continually coming up with “universal” motives, in the sense that people in all times and places manifest the same range of emotions, though necessarily in widely varying situations’ (Burke 163)” (Cutchins and Meeks 304).

<sup>iv</sup> For more information on Ambady’s findings, see her findings her article “Half a minute: Predicting teacher evaluations from thin slices of nonverbal behavior and physical attractiveness” (Ambady).

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<sup>v</sup> The tighter the package, the more abstract the text becomes. Depending on the amount of time and space we have to work with, we can choose to summarize a text in a single phrase or a single paragraph, fundamentally changing the information and sentiments shared with our audience.

<sup>vi</sup> Metroidvanias are labeled as such because of their action/adventure elements borrowed from *Super Metroid* and *Castlevania* in which the player explores a large, partially locked map that slowly opens up as the player gains new abilities that aid movement and accessibility. Rogue-likes are named for the game *Rogue* that used randomly generated levels and partial perma-death (permanent death) to surprise and challenge the player. Souls-likes are named after the *Dark Souls* games and are known for their extreme difficulty, demanding combat, and unique death mechanic involving the collection of dropped items used for upgrades that can be lost, but later regained, upon death.

<sup>vii</sup> See the "Power grip" and "Precision grip" as described by Christopher Collins (Collins 40).

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