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Animation and Revision in Loving Vincent
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Résumé de l'article

Selon certains point de vue, Loving Vincent (2017) se présenterait comme une adaptation: du point de vue narratif, ce long métrage animé serait un biopic qui adapterait la vie de Vincent van Gogh et, plus précisément, les semaines ayant précédé sa mort. Du point de vue visuel, le film adapte le style de l'artiste par le biais de l'animation, en employant les techniques, les personnages et les décors de van Gogh afin d'élaborer et de réviser les événements de ses derniers jours.

Du point de vue de la théorie de l'adaptation, Loving Vincent mettrait en œuvre une série productive d'idées de fidélité. Cet essai soutient que l'imitation hyper-fidèle de l'esthétique de van Gogh par l'animation ouvre la voie à une version révisionniste de son décès, qui s'écarte considérablement des récits historiques antérieurs. Ces jeux constructifs avec la fidélité—rester hyper-fidèle au style et à l'esthétique de l'artiste tout en remettant en question les points de l'intrigue concernant son décès—montrent le spectre complet et complexe de la fidélité dans l'adaptation. Que cela nous plaise ou non, en tant que critiques, les concepts de fidélité (et les attentes du public qu'ils suscitent) sont des questions auxquelles chaque adaptation est confrontée et dans lesquelles elle s'engage.

L'examen des aspects animés et narratifs de Loving Vincent suggère qu'au lieu d'être prescriptifs, les concepts de fidélité peuvent créer une tension productive dans une adaptation. L'animation du film construit une fidélité visuelle qui permet de jouer librement avec la spéculation historique, ce qui pourrait autrement déconcerter le public. Ironiquement, l'utilisation de l'animation dans le film (qui reproduit méticuleusement le style de Van Gogh) confère au texte un niveau de réalisme et d'autorité qui atténue le jeu de genre (le film biopic se présente sous la forme d'un roman policier) et l'histoire révisionniste (adaptée de la biographie Van Gogh : The Life, publiée en 2011). De cette manière, nous pourrions considérer que l'animation de Loving Vincent établit simultanément une continuité et fournit une expansion et une élaboration, pour emprunter des termes aux études transmédias.

Moving Pictures: Animation and Revision in *Loving Vincent*

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ABSTRACT

Loving Vincent *(2017) functions as an adaptation in several interesting ways: narratively, the animated feature is a biopic that adapts Vincent van Gogh's life, specifically the weeks leading up to his death. Visually, the film adapts the artist's style through animation, employing van Gogh's techniques, characters, and settings in order to flesh out and revise the events of his last days.*

From the perspective of adaptation theory, Loving Vincent *enacts a productive series of engagements with fidelity. This essay argues that the animation's hyper-faithful mimicking of van Gogh's aesthetics paves the way for its revisionist version of his death, one which departs significantly from previous historical accounts. These constructive plays with fidelity—remaining hyper-faithful to the artist's style and aesthetics while simultaneously challenging plot-points of his death—rehearse the full and complex spectrum of fidelity in adaptation. Whether we, as critics, like it or not, concepts of fidelity (and the audience-expectations they enact) are issues confronted and engaged by every adaptation.*

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An engagement with the animated and narrative aspects of Loving Vincent *suggests that rather than being prescriptive, concepts of fidelity can create a productive tension in an adaptation. The film's animation constructs a visual fidelity that enables a free play with historical speculation that might otherwise jar viewers. Ironically, the film's use of animation (meticulously reproducing van Gogh's style) lends the text a level of realism and authority that smooths the genre play (the biopic is delivered in the form of a detective story) and revisionist history (adapted from the 2011 biography* Van Gogh: The Life*). In this way, we might see* Loving Vincent*'s animation as simultaneously establishing continuity and providing expansion and elaboration, to borrow terms from transmedia studies.*

Keywords: *Vincent van Gogh · fidelity · biopic · historical revision · aesthetics*

Introduction

This essay explores the ways that animation fuels adaptation in *Loving Vincent* (Kobiela & Welchman, 2017). In a conventional sense, *Loving Vincent* functions as a biopic that reconstructs the last days of Vincent van Gogh's life. As the first fully-painted feature, composed of 65,000 frames hand-painted by 125 artists, the film is also an innovative work of animation, using van Gogh's art as a direct lens through which to view and understand his life and death. The movie immerses viewers into van Gogh's world by constructing each of its characters and locations from the people, places, and things found on van Gogh's canvases. The animation simulates not only the artist's subjects but also his subjectivity, which is to say, his style, color palette, brush strokes, perspective, etc. In a sense, the film is literally and figuratively a moving homage to the man's art.

Less conventionally, *Loving Vincent* is a rotoscoped neo-noir that employs a detective-story structure to, among other things, adapt an alternate theory of the painter's death, first developed in the 2011 biography *Van Gogh, the Life* by Steven Niafeh and Gregory White Smith. That book has become notorious for its revision of the artist's death, but it should be mentioned that the historians begin their final chapter, "No one knows what happened in the five or six hours between Vincent's midday meal at the Ravoux Inn on Sunday July 27, and his return with a bullet hole in his stomach that night[1]." Further, the authors offer their alternate theory not in the biography itself, but as an Appendix called "A Note on Vincent's Fatal Wounding" (*Ibid*., p. 869), which they describe, in a footnote at the outset of the final chapter as, "our views on what happened on the day of the shooting" (*Ibid*., p. 851). Thus, the biographers carefully marginalize their revision, or even further, place it outside the biography-proper.

In its capacity as a biopic, however, *Loving Vincent* foregrounds and centers that theory, making it clear from the outset that the film's goal is to engage with and rethink the mystery of the artist's death. Indeed, the film opens with two epigraphs, the first, the painted image of a newspaper story: "On Sunday July 27, one Van Gogh, aged 37, Dutch painter staying at Auvers, shot himself with a revolver in the fields, but being only wounded, returned to his room, where he died two days later," and the second, a quote from van Gogh's final letter, "We cannot speak other than by our paintings" (Letter 652). From there, the biopic jumps to a year after the artist's death, seeking to fill in and understand van Gogh's

[1] Niafeh, Steven; Smith, Gregory White, *Van Gogh, The Life*, New York: Random House, 2011, p. 851.

mindset and those missing five or six hours preceding his death on July 27, 1890 that mark the end of Niafeh and Smith's biography.

In doing so, *Loving Vincent* functions as a complex dual-level engagement and play with concepts of fidelity: 1. fidelity to van Gogh's art and aesthetics, and 2. fidelity to his biography. That is, the film works as an adaptation in several interesting ways: narratively, the biopic adapts van Gogh's life, specifically the weeks leading up to his death. Visually, the film adapts the artist's style to re-envision those last days. This essay argues that the film's use of animation works to enact creative and productive engagements with fidelity. Specifically, *Loving Vincent*'s hyper-faithful mimicking of van Gogh's aesthetics and viewpoint paves the way for the film's revisionist narrative, one that introduces an alternate version of the artist's death that departs significantly from previous historical accounts. These constructive plays with fidelity—overtly remaining true to van Gogh's aesthetics and subjects, while simultaneously challenging historical plot-points of his death—rehearse a fuller and more complex engagement with the concept of fidelity in adaptation. The film shifts away from rigid binary thinking, where a text is either faithful or unfaithful to its source, and toward the possibility of concepts of fidelity occupying a more flexible and productive spectrum.

An engagement with the animated and narrative aspects of *Loving Vincent* suggests that rather than being prescriptive, the concept of fidelity can work fluidly to construct a productive and creative tension in an adaptation. In the case of *Loving Vincent*, the film's animation produces a visual fidelity that enables a free play with historical speculation, stabilizing narrative choices that might otherwise jar viewers. In a way, the animation cuts against the grain of expectation, in that we generally view animation as a move away from realism. Indeed, Paul Wells points to that move as enabling in the process of animated adaptation: "Animation may be viewed as a film form which finally liberates text/screen debates from the preoccupation with issues about realism[2]." For Wells, animated adaptation's move away from realism opens up other avenues of critical discourse. Such a move is particularly interesting when we consider the idea that van Gogh's specific style of painting can be seen as an artistic response to- and move away from photo-realism. Yet within *Loving Vincent*, the animation actually works to heighten the realism of the text. Setting the entire story-world within the subjective aesthetics of van Gogh's painting increases the authenticity of the narrative, smoothing the way for the film's revisionist theory of the artist's death to feel faithful to van

[2] Wells, Paul, "Classic Literature and Animation: All Adaptations Are Equal, but Some Are More Equal Than Others," *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, Cartmell, Deborah and Whelehan, Imelda (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 200.

Gogh's vision. In this way, we might see *Loving Vincent* functioning as an adaptation that uses animation to simultaneously establish continuity and provide expansion and elaboration, to borrow terms from transmedia studies.

Erica Haugtvedt centers expansion and elaboration as the act and product of adaptation: "Adaptations are thus properly understood as sites of expansion that seek to elaborate—or even rewrite—elements of beloved stories that have come before[3]." Haugtvedt's configuration, in a sense, works toward Linda Hutcheon's formula of adaptation as "repetition without replication[4]," which acknowledges the act's fundamentally fraught and complex relationship with the concept of fidelity. In the case of *Loving Vincent*, the animation offers a meticulous repetition of van Gogh's art. However, that aesthetic repetition is not contained by the adaptation; rather it is accompanied by a narrative expansion and revision of van Gogh's biography, specifically, a rewriting of the events of the artist's death. In that way, the animation enacts a dynamic relationship between fidelity and the biopic, offering a hyper-faithful expansion of van Gogh's subjects, settings, and aesthetics even as it revises the historical account of his death. The seeming tension between those two treatments of fidelity offers an opportunity to expand our critical understanding of the often-problematic concept.

Fidelity and the Object of Subjectivity

The directors of *Loving Vincent*, Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman, built up the world of the film through van Gogh's specific point of view, using 134 of the artist's canvases. Kobiela explains that the project emerged out of the subjectivity of the painter's work: "You don't get artists who paint so much and so personally[5]." Specifically, Kobiela reflects and elaborates on the ways van Gogh's art structures her film: "His paintings represent such a big range of subjects; his room, his objects, his shoes, his best friends, his favorite bar. Together, they kind of naturally created the storyboard" (*Idem*). So in a way, *Loving Vincent* as an adaptation has two target texts: van Gogh's life story (the film's narrative) and van Gogh's paintings (the film's settings, characters, and aesthetics). While everything in the movie has its genesis in van Gogh's canvases, Welchman draws a distinction between the act of animation and that of simple copying: insisting that, while the film's frames were all modeled on the original paintings,

[3] Haugtvedt, Erica, "Sweeney Todd as Victorian Transmedial Storyworld," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 49, n°3, Fall 2016, p. 443.
[4] Hutcheon, Linda, *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 5.
[5] *Loving Vincent: The Impossible Dream*, Poland, United Kingdom, 2019, dir. by Miki Wesel.

> They can't be [faithful copies]. There's a difference between a static single image and a dynamic art form told over time. We spent one year reimagining his paintings for the medium of film, trying to be as faithful as possible, but also adapting them so that they could move (*Idem*).

Thus, the filmmakers push back on the concept of high visual fidelity, specifically evoking the film's status as "animated." That is, van Gogh painted static images, which the filmmakers then "built up" into an animated world. Further, the film was rotoscoped, which starts with motion-picture footage of live actors that is then painted over by artists, frame by frame, to produce realistic movement. As Kobiela puts it, "For each shot the original painting served as a sort of mask on top of the live-action material" (*Idem*). Thus, the film exists as a palimpsest: it begins with the first layer: the composition of the original painting, then it adds a layer of live action, and then another layer of colors and brushstrokes. In its very conception and construction, the movie evidences tensions between fidelity and expansion. This essay argues that those tensions animate the film in integral and productive ways.

As animation scholar Giannalberto Bendazzi puts it: "In a way, every adaptation is a parody, or a re-stylization, like in painting, every painting is a stylization or a caricature[6]." Bendazzi's "parody or re-stylization" might also be called interpretation. That dynamic is interesting with regard to *Loving Vincent*, which is itself both an adaptation and a caricature / parody, of sorts. But only of sorts. Because, as Hannes Rall points out in his interview with Bendazzi, the line between parody, homage, and constructive art can run thin. Rall uses *What's Opera, Doc?* as his example—specifically, the idea that Chuck Jones's cartoon goes beyond spoofing Richard Wagner's operas and, through its animation, actually creates drama of its own (*Ibid*., p. 14-16). In *Loving Vincent*, the task of the animators is to move beyond an homage to van Gogh and into the realm of an adaptation that functions as revisionist historiography. Obviously, this is not achieved through re-stylization. Just the opposite, in fact—the animators hew as closely as possible to van Gogh's stylistics. Yet the film still uses animation to make the move toward adaptive interpretation. Wells points to the specific way that animation "liberates" an adaptation by enabling that dynamic: "[Animation itself] is not an act of record, but of interpretation, and has the advantage of not having to be mediated through the available 'signs' of live actors, physical locations, material period costumes, etc." (1999, p. 201). *Loving Vincent*'s animation does function as a sort of "act of record," in that it is mediated through the artist's available signs.

[6] Rall, Hannes, *Adaptation for Animation: Transforming Literature Frame by Frame*, Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2019, p. 17.

And it is at that point that the animation's fidelity works to tamp down the radical nature of its revision; it disguises historical infidelity (at least from the perspective of accepted mainstream historical authorities) by creating continuity through visual fidelity. In that way, the film evidences animation's specific ability to create a convergence between fidelity and infidelity in the act of adaptation; it simultaneous meets aesthetic expectations, while challenging narrative expectations, establishing an enabling tension.

Bendazzi agrees with Wells's configuration of animation's ability to creatively and productively express what is implied in literature in ways that defy film's realism: "Animation is the ace up your sleeve, because animation can invent things that you don't have to look for in reality, in the real world. So the language of animation is physically based on the possibility to invent, to paint, to mold, to create things that you are filming" (2019, p. 18). Bendazzi is speaking about animation in adaptations of the fairy tale. While obviously, *Loving Vincent* does not require those sorts of veers away from physical reality, the animation does allow the filmmakers to create a world that defies reality, specifically in ways that bend the viewer toward understanding van Gogh's subjectivity and the perspective that shapes his artistic vision. Thus, the film's animation allows a retelling / adaptation of the artist's story in a "stylized" way that moves beyond caricature and homage to construct meaning.

Rall points out that, "Animation is world building from scratch, and it also often presents a highly personalized world view […] a very subjectified vision […] which might be described in internal monologue in literature" (2019, p. 19). Obviously, the animation in *Loving Vincent* works along these lines, however the filmmakers also uses van Gogh's letters, read in voiceover. The result is a film that spends most of its time in the artist's subjective view of the world, both physically and psychologically. With that intense subjectivity in mind, the flashback scenes function interestingly. While the principal animation is delivered in van Gogh's style and color palette, the flashbacks are different. Offered in clean black and white sketches, devoid of the artist's trademark colors and brushstrokes, and employing traditional perspective and depth, these scenes lack the subjectivity and impressionism of the story-proper. Here, the animation works toward objectivity, dealing with details in the artist's biography that are not open to interpretation—at least not in this film. In that way, the sketch-style, black-and-white, flashback animation works more like a classic biopic, prizing accuracy, while the dominant, impressionistic, color animation complicates the traditional biopic by immersing the viewer not in van Gogh's biography as much as in the artist's subjective vision of the world.

Loving Vincent opens on a starry night, a year after van Gogh's death. Armand Roulin (Douglas Booth), the troubled son of van Gogh's former postman and friend, Joseph Roulin (Chris O'Dowd), is charged by his father to deliver a recently found letter from the deceased artist to his brother Theo (Cezary Lukaszewicz). When Armand learns that Theo died 6 months after his brother; he returns to his father and declares the letter undeliverable. In a conversation that takes place in van Gogh's *Café Terrace at Night*, Roulin's father lays out the mystery. He reads from a letter the artist wrote him, six weeks before his death, in which van Gogh declares that he feels "absolutely calm and in a normal state." The postman, convinced by inconsistencies between the artist's letters and the accounts of his death, rejects the official story of suicide, and implores his son to fill in the blanks of his friend's last days. The film suggests that both Roulin's struggle with alcohol and mental health issues, with the further suggestion being that the father sends his son on the journey to stem a crisis in the young man's life. Thus, Armand assumes the role of psychological detective, and the audience's narrative avatar. From that point forward, the neo-noir adaptation of the artist's biography unwinds, revises, and re-interprets the accepted history of one of the most vital aspects of the van Gogh legend: his death.

It is worth noting that, while Armand Roulin was a real person, the narrative device of having him function as a detective in the throes of an identity crisis is fictional. Van Gogh used a teenaged Roulin as a subject several times, at a point when the young man worked as a blacksmith's apprentice. He plays no further role in the artist's biography. Nor does his father. Thus, the film merges biography and fiction. All of the characters seen on screen have their genesis in van Gogh's portraits. But their participation in the plot forms a sort of biography/fiction spectrum: some of the characters' actions are rooted in van Gogh's letters or biographies written about the artist; some of their actions are speculative and advance plausible biographical theories; and some are simply fictional. The biopic's mingling of official biography, speculative revision, and fiction makes the facts of the narrative slippery and interesting from the perspective of historiography and adaptation.

The biopic and convergence culture: how the legend becomes fact

The biopic, as a genre, received little critical attention in the 20th century, but a slew of recent studies rushed to fill the void. At times, the concerns of that discourse mirror that of adaptation, specifically around issues of fidelity. In

panning *Quills* (Kaufman, 2000), Marquis de Sade biographer Neil Schaeffer considers questions of historical accuracy:

> What is the harm in misrepresenting the true nature of de Sade's life and career? […] The artist must make choices to put some things in and leave others out, a rule that applies to biographers as well. But if a biographer makes a mish-mash of his subject, there is hell to pay[7].

While Schaeffer's historical "true nature" vaguely evokes fidelity, James Welsh's "Hollywood 'Faction' and the New Biofantasy," writes a more specific recipe for the biopic: "The truth evolves from carefully researched primary sources and is consistent with and parallel to conclusions drawn by historians. The life is neither falsified nor fabricated[8]." It is simple, Welsh suggests, just stick to the facts.

But is it? Sonia Amalia Haiduc challenges Welsh's formula:

> [G]iven the multiplicity of sources on which biopics are based, such as biographies, memoirs, letters, works of fiction, songs, paintings, interviews, and an endless variety of cultural appropriations, most attempts to pry fact and fiction apart are demonstrably pointless[9].

Haiduc points out that many sources exist, and they don't all agree. The concept of fidelity in the biopic illustrates what Robert Stam calls the "chimera of fidelity" (2000, p. 54), positioning fidelity as a hazy myth that ultimately leads to the impossible-to-answer question: "Fidelity to what?" (*Ibid*., p. 57) Which primary sources should filmmakers carefully research? Which historians should they remain consistent with and parallel to? In *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic*, Márta Minier and Maddalena Pennacchia thread the needle to offer an open-ended set of possibilities:

> The biopic, as adaptation in general, has the means to pose questions to the viewer, to challenge received understandings of issues around their subject, even to the extent of subverting its politics. They may also do the contrary: embrace and reinforce their subjects' politics and values[10].

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[7] Schaeffer, Neil, "Perverting de Sade," *The Guardian*, 12 January, 2001, p. 27.

[8] Welsh, James, "Hollywood 'Faction' and the New Biofantasy," *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 15, n°2, 1993, p. 61.

[9] Haiduc, Sonia Amalia, "Biopics and the Melodramatic Mode," *A Companion to the Biopic*. Cartmell, Deborah, Polasek, Ashley (eds.), Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019, p. 25.

[10] Minier, Márta and Pennacchia, Maddalena, *Adaptation, Intermediality and the British Celebrity Biopic*, New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 12.

The biopic can be myth-making or myth-breaking, which accords with the view of adaptation as interpretation rather than translation of its source. According to Haiduc, "In culture at large the biopic simply becomes another point in the complex intertextual and intermedial web of references surrounding the biographical subject" (2019, p. 34), or as Henry Jenkins would put it, it becomes a node of convergence culture[11]. In that way, the biopic comes to function as history. And as Defne Ersin Tutan points out, "all historical representations are radically adaptive […] every version of history should be regarded as a rewriting, essentially an adaptation, since the historian adapts the material she or he has at hand into a pre-planned scheme to meet a certain end[12]." Tutan's formula positions historical representation as versioning, productively acknowledging the often-uncomfortable (and conveniently ignored) fact that historiography inherently involves interpretation.

Van Gogh's biography is a particularly challenging one for historians. The artist produced a multitude of paintings and letters. Such artifacts offer many specifics and details; at the same time, they leave many vital aspects of the artist's biography unsettled. From the perspective of the biographer, such texts are potentially problematic in that they are inherently interpretable. Hayden White notes that historiography's fundamental reliance on subjective interpretation leads to a crisis, requiring historical theorists to negotiate potential instabilities by subordinating interpretation to explanation:

> [I]t becomes necessary to determine the extent to which historians' explanations of past events can qualify as objective accounts of reality […] The "proper historian" seeks to explain what happened in the past by providing a precise and accurate reconstruction of the events reported in the documents. He does this presumably by suppressing as far as possible his impulse to interpret[13].

White's use of scare quotes around the term "proper historian" suggests the dubious nature of the historian as objective-explainer. Indeed, such suppression of interpretation is impossible for the biographer of van Gogh, as all of his history filters through not only fundamentally interpretable texts such as letters and

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[11] Jenkins, Henry, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press, 2006, pp. 17-19.

[12] Tutan, Defne Ersin, "Adaptation and History," *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, Leitch, Thomas (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 576.

[13] White, Hayden, "Interpretation in History," *New Literary History*, Vol. 4, n°2, *On Interpretation: II*, Winter 1973, p. 282.

paintings, but also through his mental state, a thing impossible to determine objectively even if the subject were alive.

If van Gogh's life is available to us mainly through variably interpretable texts, his death exaggerates that dynamic. The artist died of a gunshot wound in Auvers, France, on the 29th of July, 1890—that much we know. However, no physical evidence was preserved; the location of the shooting was never conclusively identified; no autopsy performed; no eyewitnesses came forward; and van Gogh left no note. In short, White's "precise and accurate reconstruction of events reported in documents" is all but impossible. The earliest written account came from a mourner at van Gogh's funeral, friend and fellow artist Emile Bernard, who arrived in Auvers two days after van Gogh's death. In a letter to critic Albert Auxier, Bernard writes:

> Our dear friend Vincent died four days ago. I think that you will have already guessed the fact that he killed himself. On Sunday evening he went out into the countryside near Auvers, placed his easel against a haystack and went behind the chateau and fired a revolver shot at himself. Under the violence of the impact (the bullet entered his body below the heart) he fell, but he got up again, and fell three times more, before he got back to the inn where he was staying[14].

More than simply providing the ur-narrative of van Gogh's death-by-suicide, Bernard's letter gives the first interpretation of it, producing a structural template for subsequent biographers: a psycho-analytical interpretation that uses the man's art to explain and understand his death. Bernard describes van Gogh's deathbed: "On the walls of the room where his body was laid out all his last canvases were hung making a sort of halo for him." He identifies one of the paintings—*Prisoners' Round*, and then interprets it as a reflection of the artist's life and death:

> [It is] a canvas inspired by Doré of a terrifying ferocity and which is also symbolic of his end. Wasn't life like that for him, a high prison like this with such high walls—so high […] and these people walking endlessly round this pit, weren't they the poor artists, the poor damned souls walking past under the whip of Destiny?

Bernard establishes a narrative of a tragic end to a tragic life—the tortured artist, imprisoned in and ground down by a world that neither understands nor appreciates him. Trapped inside those walls, he looks out at us from his canvases, testifying to his plight. Eventually, he escapes by taking his own life.

[14] https://www.webexhibits.org/vangogh/letter/21/etc-Bernard-Aurier.htm (consulted 2/5/2025).

Biopics (and biographies) have followed Bernard's lead, filtering their "explanation" of van Gogh's death through "interpretations" of his canvases. A primary lens for such interpretive work is *Wheatfied with Crows*. Irving Stone's 1934 biographical novel *Lust for Life*, often cited as a historical source, reports that the day before his fatal wounding, van Gogh sat under a fiery sun and completed his final painting, *Wheatfield* (which the novelist calls *Crows above a Cornfield*). The next day, drained, he wanders toward the fields. A peasant spots him sitting in a tree, hears him mutter "It is impossible! […] It is impossible![15]" The artist climbs down from the tree and thinks about a catalogue of people he would like to say goodbye to: "But words had never been his medium. He would have to paint goodbye. One cannot paint goodbye" (*Ibid*., p. 484). And then in three simple sentences, he commits suicide: "He turned his face upward toward the sun. He pressed the revolver to his side. He pulled the trigger" (*Idem*).

Vincente Minnelli's 1956 adaptation turns away from Stone's simple direct style to represent van Gogh's death spectacularly[16]. It places the artist (Kirk Douglas) in a wheat field in front of his "last" painting. As he works on the canvas, he is attacked by crows. The disturbance infuriates him—even nature is against him. He angrily twists a murder of crows into the previously bright scene, and darkens the blue sky with daubs of black. Then he drops his brush, grunting, "It's impossible," twice before staggering over to a tree and scrawling out a note: "I am desperate I can foresee absolutely nothing I see no way out." From there, the artist pulls a pistol from his coat pocket. The camera cuts away to a farmer riding in a wagon. We hear the gunshot. Not only does the film produce a suicide note that does not exist, but we watch the artist write it, feel his despair as the pencil drags down the crossed "t" in out. While it invents the note, the film participates in / furthers the biographical theory of *Wheatfield with Crows* as van Gogh's final painting, which fits nicely into the narrative of the artist's death by suicide—the turbulent blackness in the otherwise bright sky and the presence of the crows weave well into a tale of personal and artistic suffering. Far better than *The Town Hall at Auvers*, *Daubigny's Garden*, or *Tree Roots*, all of which, according to van Gogh's letters, postdate *Wheatfield*.

Stone's novel and Minelli's film catalyzed a renewed historical interest in the events of van Gogh's death in the 30s and 50s respectively. As many of the principles were still alive, this led to new interviews with surviving witnesses,

[15] Stone, Irving, *Lust for Life*, New York: Penguin, 1934, p. 483.
[16] *Lust for Life*, United States, 1956, dir. by Vincente Minnelli.

several of whom changed their version of events to match the novel and film, and this butterfly-effect inflected testimony subsequently entered into the historical record. From there, as Smith and Niafeh put it, "For many decades, suicide was the unquestioned final chapter of Vincent van Gogh's legend[17]." Similarly (though inverted), Naifeh and Smith's biography-theory fed not only *Loving Vincent*'s biopic revision but also Julian Schnabel's 2018 van Gogh biopic, *At Eternity's Gate*, starring Willem Dafoe. And so, the waters of history become muddied. Stone's novel became historically authoritative and was then adapted into a biopic that traffics in historical inaccuracies while retaining historical authority. Indeed, *The Guardian* recently called Minnelli's adaptation (of a work of fiction), "A watchable biopic, backed up with excellent historical research[18]." If Tutan is correct, and all historiography is adaptation, then it all involves interpretation. However, White's formula for the "proper historian" testifies to the public's desire, its need for (at least the semblance of) objective authority, which causes the historian to rhetorically avoid giving the impression of interpretation. Life is explained by the biographer; as such, it comes to us not as a version but as definitive. In discussing the possibility of public acceptance of Smith and Niafeh's re-visioning van Gogh's death, a curator of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam points to the effect of this dynamic: "[T]he biggest problem […] is that the suicide [as depicted by Minnelli] is more or less imprinted on the brains of past and present generations and has become a sort of self-evident truth" (2014). It doesn't matter that Minnelli's biopic is based on a novel. Or that it gets van Gogh's last painting or the location of his shooting wrong. Or that it invents a suicide note. It is history: explanation, not interpretation.

Of course, as White's scare quotes attest, there is in fact no explanation without interpretation. History, biopics, adaptation—all explain *through* interpretation. That is, each representation, each attempt at explanation necessarily requires and then makes interpretive choices, a vision and version of events, which it then imprints on the brain of its audience. Until the landscape shifts and the history evolves, or adapts, or is adapted in different directions. In the end, biopics don't merely pull from a "multitude of sources," they become sources themselves in the subsequent social construction of the narrative. In the case of van Gogh's death, as the curator puts it, "Vincent's suicide has become the grand finale of the story of the martyr for art, it's his crown of thorns" (2014). The

[17] "NCIS: Provence: The Van Gogh Mystery," *Vanity Fair*, December 2014, https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2014/12/vincent-van-gogh-murder-mystery (consulted 2/5/2025).

[18] https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/apr/08/reel-history-lust-for-life (consulted 2/5/2025).

details of that interpretation become a seemingly self-evident truth by imprinting on the brains of generations, in that place where legend becomes fact.

In order to carry out that imprinting process—or in this case, the revision of that imprinting process (which itself becomes a new imprinting)—texts participate in transmedia cycles. According to Henry Jenkins's concept,

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story[19].

In this case, we see four revisionist versions of the alternate-theory of Vincent's death—the biography *Van Gogh: The Life* (2011); a 2014 article by Niafeh and Smith in *Vanity Fair*, "NCIS: Provence: The Van Gogh Mystery;" the animated biopic *Loving Vincent* (2017); and the live-action biopic *At Eternity's Gate* ***(2018).*** Jenkins's concept testifies to Hutcheon's idea that "multiple versions exist laterally not vertically" (2013, xv). Adaptations do not replace one another as much as they converge and walk together, at least for a time.

Loving Vincent openly occupies that space where, through convergence, legend becomes fact. And the film's animation actively drives that process. As if playing off previous narrative depictions of the artist's death delivered in other biopics, the film veers to depict Armand Roulin walking into van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* directly after hearing Dr. Joseph Mazery (Bill Thomas) offer Niafeh and Smith's alternate theory of the artist's death—one in which the placement of the wound, the bullet's trajectory, and the lack of powder burns all suggest that the shot wasn't fired by van Gogh. Rather than flesh out the location of a suicide, *Wheatfield* becomes a place to mull the possibility that van Gogh did *not* take his life but was shot by a 16-year-old local named Rene Secretan. Further, the wheat field becomes the location where Marguerite Gachet (Saoirse Ronin) argues that the details of the artist's death should play no defining role in his legacy—instead, those who would interpret van Gogh should focus on his life. And even more, on his particular genius, which she lays out: "You want to know so much about his death, but what do you know about his life? No detail of life was too small or humble for him. He appreciated and loved it all." Thus, the film reconfigures and shifts *Wheatfield*, as it shifts the legend of Vincent van Gogh. *Loving Vincent* re-envisions the wheat field from a spot where other biopics

[19] "Pop Junctions," March 21, 2007, https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html (consulted 2/5/2025).

represented a tortured genius, driven by unquenchable artistic passion or loneliness or mental illness took his own life, into a place of clarity. In doing so, *Loving Vincent* develops a complex play with history. In one way, it eschews details of previous revisionist versions of the artist's death, offered by conventional biopics. I call the previous versions revisionist, because whether van Gogh shot himself or was shot by Rene Secretan, the bullet was not fired in a wheat field. Yet somehow, in the convergence-culture emergence of the legend of the artist's life and death, the wheat field has become the location of van Gogh's wounding. Each version has the confused artist wandering into a wheat field to paint it and staggering out with a bullet in his stomach. And each version takes care to make the set look like a real-life version of van Gogh's canvas. Through its animation, *Loving Vincent* allows its characters to walk, not into a set that looks like the artist's wheat field, but rather into *Wheatfield* itself. However, the animated biopic transforms the artist's canvas into a location that van Gogh described in one of his final letters to Theo: "I'd almost believe that these canvases will tell you what I can't say in words, what I consider healthy and fortifying about the countryside[20]" (Letter 898). Once again, we see the concept of van Gogh "speaking" through his art, and his expression in *Wheatfield* is not one of death and confusion, but of health and vitality. The immersive quality of the animation, its fidelity to van Gogh's subjective vision, helps redirect and correct previous revisions, even as it offers the possibility of a revision of its own, one that veers away from fidelity to conventional biographies of the artist, and toward reinterpretations of its subject through his art and letters.

Conclusion: Adaptation theory, historiography, interpretation & fidelity

Loving Vincent delivers an act of historical revision, driven and enabled by the act of animation. By offering van Gogh's *Wheatfield* as a location not for the artist's death but rather as a location for a consideration of alternate theories of his mortal wounding, the adaptation re-interprets that death. The audience receives something familiar and canny (the iconic wheat field) and something new and uncanny (Armand Roulin and Marguerite Gachet in that field). Moreover, the animation enhances verisimilitude by immersing the viewer in *van Gogh's Wheatfield*, as opposed to locating the action in a realistic set designed to suggest and approximate the painting. Again, the conventional wisdom of animation

[20] *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let898/letter.html (consulted 2/5/2025).

theory would be that such animation serves as a remove, or as Wells puts it, a "liberation" from historical realism. Logically speaking, such a disconnect would render the shift from suicide to murder more jarring. Yet the animation's intense fidelity to van Gogh's locations, subjects, and subjectivity—its ability to immerse its audience in Vincent's world and thus his mind—actually heightens the realism, thereby licensing and naturalizing the biopic's revisionist interpretations.

Significantly, the alternate theory of the artist's death is delivered in the film by Dr. Mazery. In fact, Dr. Joseph Mazery, a Parisian obstetrician on vacation in Auvers, was the first doctor to examine van Gogh's wound. He and Dr. Paul Gachet would determine that the bullet could not be safely removed. Beyond that, nothing definitive is known about the man. Most likely, he had never met van Gogh until he examined his wound, and he certainly never sat for the artist. Yet given the decision to populate the story with only people painted, the artist representing Mazery as a character required the filmmakers to combine him with a van Gogh subject. They chose *Sorrowing Old Man (At Eternity's Gate)*, an oil painting, based on an 1882 lithograph, and completed in May 1890, just before van Gogh's arrival in Auvers. The actual subject was Adrianus Jacobus Zuyderland, a war veteran who often sat for the artist. Van Gogh writes of the lithograph in a letter to Theo: "It seems to me that a painter has a duty to try to put an idea into his work. I was trying to say this in this print—but I can't say it as beautifully, as strikingly as reality, of which this is only a dim reflection seen in a dark mirror[21]" (Letter 288). The idea of art as "a dim reflection [of reality] seen in a dark mirror" is interesting, in that it seems to directly contradict the ethos of *Loving Vincent*, where art retains the ability to attain a clarity and beauty that transcends reality.

The film's specific use of Mazery parallels this clarity-ethos. It begins with detective Armand finding the doctor in the pose of *Sorrowing Old Man*: an old man dressed in blue and seated on a van-Gogh chair before a fire, hunched forward in anguish, elbows on his knees, face buried in his fists. A portrait of despair. But as the film animates the portrait, that is, as Dr. Mazery lifts his head and responds to Armand, a smile spreads across his face. And his recounting of the details of van Gogh's injury crackles with lively energy. Those details are taken directly from the theory offered by Smith and Niafeh in *Van Gogh: The Life* and "NCIS: Provence." Far from dim and dark reflections, they brim with light and movement to reconfigure the interpreted reality of Vincent's death. Directly after his

[21] *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*, https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let288/letter.html (consulted 2/5/2025).

conversation with Mazery, Armand walks into van Gogh's *Wheatfield* to consider the events and implications of the artist's death.

Thus the film enacts a complex synthesis of Tutan's concept that "every version of history should be regarded as a rewriting, essentially an adaptation" (2017, p. 576), Stam's concept that an adaptation functions as "reading" or interpretation of its source (2000, p. 62-63), and White's concept that the "proper historian," is s/he who can adequately "suppress […] [their] impulse to interpret" (1973, p. 282). In a way, each of these concepts deals with the issues and tensions of fidelity and the position of the historian / adapter. As adaptation scholars, Tutan and Stam, both look to circumvent discussions of fidelity by acknowledging the fundamentally subjective position of the adapter / historian, while White centers fidelity (presented as objectivity) and points out that historians look must position themselves in ways that circumvent discussions of subjectivity. Despite the fact that White's configuration of the "proper historian" would seem to clash with Tutan's and Stam's configuration of the adapter, *Loving Vincent* evidences the synthesis of these three concepts. Specifically, its use of animation allows the movie to simultaneously achieve and circumvent fidelity. The counter-intuitive realism created by the animation's extreme fidelity to van Gogh's subjects, locations, and aesthetics creates an expanded storyworld in which accepted details of the artist's death are questioned and altered. Simply put, fidelity to style enables infidelity to content.

That dynamic suggests the extreme complexity of the concept of fidelity. Stam, in outing that concept as elusive, problematic, and mythical (he labels it a "chimera"), nods to this complexity, pointing out that "The question of fidelity ignores the wider question: Fidelity to what?" (2000, p. 57). Dudley Andrew calls fidelity both "the umbilical cord that nourishes the judgments of ordinary viewers[22]" and "unquestionably the most frequent and most tiresome discussion in adaptation" (*Ibid*., p. 31). That slipperiness has led many adaptation critics (including myself) to see it as more productive to dismiss and avoid the issue of fidelity. Indeed, the scholarly field of Adaptation Studies originated with a work seeking to circumvent fidelity: George Bluestone's *Novels into Film* (1957). As the field shifted toward an increased focus on theory, or developing what Robert Ray called its absent "presiding poetics[23]," Brian McFarlane suggests fidelity's tendency to fundamentally stunt that progress: "Fidelity criticism depends on a

[22] Andrew, Dudley, "The Economies of Adaptation," *True to the Spirit*, MacCabe, Colin, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 27.

[23] Ray, Robert, "The Field of 'Film and Literature'," *Film Adaptation*, Naremore, James (ed.), New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000, p. 44.

notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct 'meaning' which the filmmaker has adhered to or in some sense violated[24]." And Thomas Leitch agrees, overtly identifying fidelity as one of the fallacies hindering the development of adaptation theory: "Fidelity to its source text […] is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation's value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense[25]." Following up these ideas in 2008, Simone Murray suggests acknowledging the death of fidelity criticism had become a formulaic component of the adaptation case study: "[T]he ritual slaying of fidelity criticism at the outset of a work has ossified into a habitual gesture, devoid of any real intellectual challenge[26]." But as David Johnson points out in "Adaptation and Fidelity," reports of that death may be greatly exaggerated[27]. Johnson's essay engages with two collections that explore the critical possibilities enabled by centering issues of fidelity—*In/Fidelity* (2008) and *True to the Spirit* (2011).

Without wading into the waters of the fidelity debate, I would like to point out the ways that *Loving Vincent* can pivot our critical focus to move away from binary views of fidelity (fidelity as good / bad) to reveal fidelity's potential complexity. Stam hints at this complexity in his attempt to pinpoint what a "faithful" adaptation should remain faithful to: the plot? the physical descriptions? author intention? the author her/himself? the narrator? the style? the narrative point of view? other literary devices? (2000, p. 57-58). The issue, for Stam and others, is that the concept of fidelity is often under-developed and over-simplified. But rather than position fidelity to exist in a simple and stable binary—either an adaptation stays true to some vague spirit of its source or it does not—*Loving Vincent* simultaneously evidences an intense fidelity to van Gogh's art while refusing to remain faithful to traditional elements of his biography. And importantly, that complexification of fidelity hinges on the film's animation. *Loving Vincent* argues that an understanding of the artist's death hinges on an interpretation of the man's specific mindset in late July 1890. The film offers a revisionist reading of that mindset that leads to a revisionist history of his death. Significantly, the lack of fidelity to accepted historical details of that death is made

[24] McFarlane, Brian, *Novel to Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 9.
[25] Leitch, Thomas, "12 Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory," *Criticism*, vol. 45, n°2, 2003, p. 167.
[26] Murray, Simone, "Materializing Adaptation Theory: The Adaptation Industry," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 36, n°1, 2008, p. 6.
[27] Johnson, David, "Adaptation and Fidelity," *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, Leitch, Thomas (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 87-100.

more acceptable by the animation's ability to visually immerse the audience in a version of van Gogh's uniquely subjective world.

This dynamic leads to a larger exploration of adaptation theory. As a biopic, the film fleshes out the productive complexity of fidelity, and perhaps allows us to trace out a fidelity complex. The animation's hyper-faithful mimicking of van Gogh's aesthetics smooths the way for its historically revisionist version of his death. These constructive plays with fidelity—overtly remaining true to the artist's style and aesthetics while simultaneously challenging plot-points of his death—rehearse the full and complex spectrum of fidelity in adaptation. The film rejects the concept of fidelity as an either / or proposition and challenges the notion that it can be achieved or perceived in a single-track way. An engagement with the animation (and corresponding narrative) of *Loving Vincent* suggests that rather than being prescriptive, the concept of fidelity can create a productive tension in an adaptation.

In the case of *Loving Vincent* as a biopic, it is possible, counter-intuitive as it may seem, that the animation actually adds to the ability of the spectator to attain Coleridge's suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith. While other van Gogh biopics bring the artist to life with actor-impersonations (Kirk Douglass, Tim Roth, Benedict Cumberbatch, Willem Dafoe, etc.), *Loving Vincent* animates van Gogh's self-portraits. On the surface, animation is a move away from realism. But the film's specific animation moves toward creating an authentic storyworld, one that approximates not reality so much as van Gogh's perception of reality. And from that position and perspective, the audience is encouraged to question established aspects of the artist's biography.

This dynamic opens out into a potential exploration of the ways that fidelity in one area—in this case, to van Gogh's characters and stylistics—might allow an adaptation to engage with expansion in others—in this case, historical revisionism. Specifically, it suggests a seeming paradox akin to David Hare's "[G]reat mystery of adaptation," the idea that "true fidelity can only be achieved through lavish promiscuity[28]." Namely, fidelity enables infidelity. From a critical-theory perspective, that paradoxical nature of fidelity makes it a fundamentally problematic concept, perhaps best avoided. At the same time, the complexity of the specific ways that *Loving Vincent*'s animation works with concepts of fidelity in both the style and content of the biopic suggests that engagement with expanded notions of the concept might open out into a productive synthetic view of adaptation. That is, focusing on one element—in this case say, the work of

[28] Hare, David, *The Hours: a screenplay*, New York: Miramax, 2002, p. ix.

animation, or historical fidelity in the biopic, or adaptation as expansion/elaboration—can be interesting. But as John Laroche puts it, "Adaptation is a profound process" (Jonze, *Adaptation*, 2002), and we must continue to work toward syntheses of these approaches in order to fully (or at least more fully) dig into and flesh out its complexity.

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