

Southern Cross University

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Flying: an exploration of fidelity

Abstract:

Using my draft novel, *Flying*, as a source work, the writing of the adaptive screenplay explores adaptation of the modern novel as both process and product from the perspective of a single creator of both works. *Flying* employs the literary tropes that make the modern novel challenging to adapt for the screen, including shifting internal realities, dreams, fluid frames of reference, stream of consciousness, multiple points of view, and subjective and objective time. This research project involves reflecting on the process and engaging with the dissonance that exists between the scholarly discussion of adaptation and professional practice. This is nowhere more contentious than in regard to the concept of fidelity – the “faithfulness” of the adaptive work to the source work. While the concept of fidelity has been widely critiqued in the academic world, in my experience the issue of fidelity is central to professional practice and therefore should be interrogated rather than dismissed.

Biographical note:

Charlie de Salis teaches screenwriting at Southern Cross University. He has writer/director credits on two broadcast documentaries, two feature documentaries and on three television plays. His short films as writer and director, *A Moment Passing* and *Flying*, have been selected for more than 26 international film festivals, including Venice and Cannes. Both were Best Short Film finalists in the New Zealand Film Awards, and *A Moment Passing* was nominated for the Golden Palm for best short film at Venice. His projects have received funding from the NZFC, Screen Australia, Screen NSW, Screen Tasmania and Screen Queensland. Charlie worked as a story consultant on the US/Aus co pro features *Undertow*, *Bad Karma* and *Absolute Deception* - and script edited the ABC telemovie *Cliffy*. He is currently involved in the development of three feature film projects as a producer and script developer, and a television series as a writer and co-creator.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Screenwriting – Adaptation – Fidelity – Modern novel

INT. EMMA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Sculptures and paintings. The room of an artist, perhaps, breathing in the ocean air; the murmur of waves, the rattle of letters, of open books and magazines shifting in the circling air, the whispering of the restless curtains edging windows.

The frame is inexorably drawn to the view between the twisting curtains, where it settles, balancing sea and sky and sand on a canvas of cerulean, azure and ivory, the horizontals broken only by a single island, peaked and serrated like a dark shark's tooth.

A voiceover comes in over the image and sounds of wind and sea, a woman's voice, not young, middle-aged.

EMMA OS

I know this place as well as my own skin. Every line, every hue, day and night. The headlands, the reefs, the sand at every tide, the shifts of light. And the island, always the island.

The frame moves back and turns, looking down at the woman asleep (or is she unconscious?) in the bed. This is EMMA SOMMERTON, our narrator. Her age is hard to tell, because cancer has emaciated her face and aged her, but she is in her early 60s. A fine, symmetrical face suggesting the striking looking woman she was. Medicines crowd the bedside table. A drip connects to her arm.

EMMA OS (CONT'D)

Is this my face, this mask of skin and bone? Have I really come to this? This poor, broken thing.

EXT. COASTAL LANDSCAPE - DAY

From high overhead, the image running beneath the narration, we see a car trailing a ribbon of chalky dust through green hills rising like the backs of whales from the darkly forested valleys.

EMMA OS

So many things that should been
said, should have been done, should
have been different. If you were
God, people would be so
disappointing. Of all the
possibilities, we choose so few.

Inside the car:

CHRIS SOMMERTON, early to mid-30s, with a sense of distracted,
unhappy detachment around him drives the hired Toyota. In the
passenger seat is his daughter, JOSIE, 8 or 9 years old, dark
hair framing a face dominated by round, cinnamon coloured
eyes, watches the landscape slip past her window.

Chris glances across at his daughter.

CHRIS

Pretty country, isn't it?

She keeps her eyes out the window. He response is flat, the
way a kid shuts out an adult.

JOSIE

Yep.

Chris is unable to restrain his exasperation.

CHRIS

Josie, how long are you going to
keep this up for?

JOSIE

Keep what up?

CHRIS

This thing, not talking to me.

JOSIE

I'm talking to you.

CHRIS

When you absolutely have to.

JOSIE

Well either I am or I'm not.

CHRIS

Don't be offensive.

JOSIE

I'm not.

Chris knows this is going nowhere and he drops it.

Josie's mobile rings. She knows the ringtone and her face changes completely. Gone is the closed withdrawal.

JOSIE (CONT'D)

(brightening)

Hey mum.

An odd expression crosses Chris's face, disguised almost as soon as it appears. Discomfort? Pain? Regret? There is some of all of those emotion that moment.

JOSIE (CONT'D)

It's really pretty. So green. It's like these giant tree ferns everywhere. I thought it would be like Australia, but it's not at all.

(listens)

I wish you were here too.

(listens)

Ok. Bye. Love you.

The car shifts back into uncomfortable silence as she turns her attention back out the window.

EXT. A BEACHSIDE VILLAGE - DAY

The Toyota drives slowly through the village. No sidewalks, just green lawn to the edge of the road, oleanders flowering pink and red and white like garlanded fireworks, pohutukawas looming, dense with buds. Neat, well maintained houses suggesting prosperous absentee owners. In the occupied houses, boats either wait on front lawns for their owners to call, fishing rods cocked, lobster pots stacked, or are being hosed down after the exertions of the morning, next to rusted tractors.

Josie takes in this strange new world, not noticing how her father's face sets as he braces himself.

CHRIS

Here we are.

He turns the car down a long driveway of the last beachfront house sent into rainforest at the very end of the road. It's not ostentatious, but the construction and design signal taste and affluence.

The car comes to a halt, and for a moment, Chris just sits, looking at the place.

Josie glances up at him now for the first time, registering how daunting her father is finding this.

A man in his mid-60s emerges - Chris's father JACK SOMMERTON, tall and lean, with a swept back wave of white hair, his tired face lined by loss. Josie sees her father hesitate, build himself up for the moment before he leaves the car.

She watches as the two men approach each other like strangers. An awkward handshake, an even more uncomfortable embrace.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Josie, come and say hello to your grandfather.

Josie reluctantly joins them. Jack doesn't know what to do with his granddaughter. He seems about to bend to embrace her, but doesn't.

JACK

I suppose you don't remember me?

Josie can't, but softens the fact.

JOSIE

A little bit.

Jack smiles, but loss permeates everything about him.

JACK

Your grandmother has been looking forward to seeing you very much. She's asleep at the moment, but I'm sure she'll be awake soon.

INT. THE BEACH HOUSE - DAY

Josie and Chris follow Jack into the house. High ceilings, open and expansive with dark, polished timber floors. It is, all in all, a beautiful room, decorated with ceramics and small sculptural pieces. On the walls, prints and several large oil paintings.

But what captures Josie's attention is the blaze of ivory and blue flooding in from the front of the house, which she can now see opens onto deck at the very edge of the dunes, overlooking the beach.

Josie turns to her father, energised by the possibility of escape.

JOSIE

Can I go to the beach?

A momentary hesitation from Chris.

CHRIS

Stay right in front, ok? I want to be able to see you at all times. Have you got your phone?

Josie holds up the smartphone, showing the lit screen.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Ok.

Something on Jack's face. A flicker. Ambiguous. And Josie's gone. Jack might be about to say something and Chris sees it.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

It's fine.

There is something unspoken between them, and somehow it is connected to the beach.

Jack busies himself with the espresso machine.

JACK

You could probably do with a coffee.

There is a wariness, a formality in their interaction. Strangers who know each other well.

CHRIS

Thanks.

He moves towards the bay windows so he can see Josie, who has just appeared on the beach, walking towards the water's edge.

JACK

How was the drive?

CHRIS

Fine.

JACK

Did you sleep in Sydney?

CHRIS

No. Liz met me at the airport with Josie and we flew straight here.

JACK

You must be exhausted.

CHRIS

I wanted to get here as quickly as I could. I was in first class, so I got some sleep.

JACK

First class?

CHRIS

It's in my contact.

He turns to face his father, engaging him for the first time.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Dad, what the fuck? I get this call that I've gotta come now if I want to see mum. Why didn't somebody talk to me? I thought she was in remission. When did you find out?

A beat.

JACK

Two months ago.

Chris stares at him.

CHRIS

Two months?

Jack turns around to face him. He looks so very tired.

JACK

It wasn't my decision.

CHRIS

Not your...

JACK

(cuts in)

Emma knew you were preparing for the film, and she decided not to tell you, because there was no point.

CHRIS

No point?

JACK

What would you have done? Come and sit here, for, how long? This is not a fast process.

Chris knows he's right and it eats into him. He turns back to the windows, watching his daughter picking up shells on the beach.

CHRIS

I should have been told.

JACK

It was Emma's decision. I wanted to call you when we got the diagnosis, but she was adamant.

A silence full of unspoken thoughts. Chris watches Josie as she collects shells at the edge of the foam left by the breaking waves.

JACK (CONT'D)

Chris, listen, if ever there was a time...

Chris's reaction is savagely emphatic as he turns to face his father.

CHRIS

Don't start thinking we're going to have one of those reconciliation scenes where everyone realises they love each other, really. We understand each other perfectly well.

JACK

You're a piece of work, aren't you?

CHRIS

Yep, well, I learned from the best.

And he moves into the house, into the shadows.

JACK

Where are you?

CHRIS

Don't worry, I won't wake her. I
just want to see her.

EXT. COASTAL LANDSCAPE - DAY

The frame moves above and between the twisting limbs of the pohutukawas hanging horizontally from the cliffs above the ocean. The first flowers are opening to enthusiastic bees. The throb of cicadas pulses through the shining air.

EMMA OS

How I love this summer song of heat
and salt. If I could disappear into
a dream like this, let my thought
separate like vapour in the
sunlight. If that could be my end.

The frame moves out now high over the bay.

EMMA OS (CONT'D)

No more sadness. No more loss.

The frame finds Josie on the sand, standing lost in the pleasure of the white foam surging around the ankles.

EMMA OS (CONT'D)

An end to memory, an end to self.
Nothing but the moment.

INT. EMMA'S BEDROOM - DAY

EMMA OS

How much longer must I endure?

Emma opens her eyes to take in the room, her son framed against the sea by the curtains.

EMMA

Chris.

Chris turns and fashions a smile. He moves to the bed, leans down and takes his mother's frail body in his arms, a bundle of sticks now, no more.

She holds him with a fierceness that belies the weakness of her frame.

CHRIS

I came as soon as I could.

Exhausted, she releases him.

EMMA

I'm sorry Chris, I know the timing
is terrible.

CHRIS

Mum, it's fine. Everything's on
hold. Everyone's been great. I just
wish I'd known sooner.

EMMA

It was my decision.

CHRIS

I know.

He stands.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

I'll get Josie.

He exits. Emma sinks back into the pillows and closes her
eyes.

EMMA OS

O my son, my beautiful, lost son.

EXT. THE BEACH - DAY

Josie is adding to her collection of shells on the hard, flat
low tide sand when she hears her father's voice, calling.

CHRIS

Josie!

She ignores him, directing her interest to the shell she has
just picked up. He comes closer, his voice cross now, louder

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Josie!

He looms above her.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

You must have heard me.

JOSIE

No.

CHRIS

Your grandmother's awake.

EXT. THE BEACH: EMMA'S POV - DAY

The frame floats above Chris and Josie as they walk up to the house, Josie to the side and slightly behind.

EMMA OS

Look at them. Perfect strangers who know each other too well. She walks just far enough to the side and behind for disconnection. She knows how he dislikes it. A war of small things.

Close now, on Josie, as if Emma is moving alongside her.

EMMA OS (CONT'D)

She's thinking, one day. One day he won't be able to tell her to do anything. One day.

Now close with Chris.

EMMA OS (CONT'D)

Oh, the promises we make to ourselves. What promises did I make to myself? Really only one. That I would love my children. And I failed them.

INT. EMMA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Arial perspective, as Jack enters and sits by the bed.

EMMA OS

And a second, a childish thing. That I would be happy. But that was not mine to promise. Happiness, sadness, loss, grief, love. They belong to the world. We do not choose them. They choose us.

The bedroom door opens, bringing her back to corporeal consciousness.

Chris guides Josie into the room. She takes it all in: the paintings on the walls, the vases of flowers, the thinness of her grandmother. Her grandfather sitting by the bed, the personification of loss. The medicine, the morphine drip, the air heavy with expectation.

The brightness of Emma's smile belies her weakness.

EMMA

Here she is. My word, haven't you grown up?

Chris's hand is on Josie's shoulder.

CHRIS

Give your grandmother a hug.

Josie leans in and embraces Emma. Chris brings up a chair so she can sit next to her grandmother.

Emma understands how difficult this is for Josie. She makes an attempt to break the ice.

EMMA

You've been collecting shells.

JOSIE

I'm going to take them back for mum's garden.

Josie glances across at her father to see if the mention of her mother has registered, and is gratified to see that it has.

EMMA

That's an excellent idea. When you travel, I've always thought that you should always take some small things back with you. I always liked snail shells.

This is unusual enough to catch Josie's interest.

JOSIE

Snails?

Emma reaches towards several large shells in the bedside table.

EMMA

I keep them next to me to remind me of those places.

JOSIE

(doubtfully)

Are those snails?

EMMA

They certainly are. That one is from Sri Lanka. The one in the middle is Vietnam. The one on the left is from Hook Island in Australia, and the biggest one is from here. It's a kauri snail, and it doesn't eat plants. It hunts creatures and eats them.

This strikes Josie as a very strange idea.

JOSIE

Really?

EMMA

New Zealand's full of strange things like that, Josie.

Josie ponders the shells.

JOSIE

They're beautiful.

EMMA

Speaking of which...

She reaches into a carved wooden jewellery box next to her, and extracts an intricate brooch, a stylised golden butterfly. The most beautiful object Josie has ever seen.

EMMA (CONT'D)

I've been saving this for you.

JOSIE

For me?

EMMA

Yes, for you, specially. Go on, take it.

Josie accepts this wondrous gift with due reverence.

CHRIS

Say thank you, Josie.

The spell is broken. Emma shoots her son a sharp, admonitory glance that orders him to be quiet, but the damage has been done.

JOSIE

Thank you, grandma.

Emma does her best to retrieve the situation.

EMMA

It belonged to my great grandmother, but nobody knows how old it really is. The design's Celtic. For the Celts, the butterfly represented transformation and creation. They thought that the butterfly was like the soul, that it could pass into the Otherworld. They called it Tír na nÓg, land of the young.

She has reached the end of her energy, and some she has borrowed.

Jack reads it in her face.

JACK

We'd better let your grandmother rest now.

Josie glances back as the door closes behind her and her father. Emma's eyes are closed, her face ivory pale. She could be dead.

EXT. SURREAL SEASCAPE - NIGHT

Darkness. No form, no sound except for Emma's voice.

EMMA OS

What is this place? Where am I?

And the darkness begins to take a form. Dark liquid, moving, bursts of light. A sound, building.

A hand reaches down into frame. A child's hand. The water rushes around it like a river, trailing a wake of tiny supernovas. A child's laughter.

A girl, EMMA as a child, perhaps 8 or 9, fair hair catching the moonlight as the dinghy pushes through the black water. Watches her hand, entranced. A man sits at the tiller, her father, TOM, lean, wiry, around 40. A good humoured face that's seen a lot of sun. Sharp, intelligent eyes.

Emma looks up at him, marvelling at the watery stars.

YOUNG EMMA

What is it?

TOM

Bioluminescence. Little creatures.
They make their own light. Touch
triggers the light. Look behind the
boat.

Em sits up, then stands in her amazement. The boat's wake
stretches out in a glowing path behind them.

TOM (CONT'D)

Remember this, Em. You might never
see it again.

Emma trails her in the starry water.

YOUNG EMMA

I had forgotten. You told to
remember. And I never did see it
again.

She looks up at her father.

YOUNG EMMA (CONT'D)

I missed you so much.

TOM

Just as well I'm here then.

YOUNG EMMA

Is this the drugs?

TOM

Does it matter?

Emma puts her hand back in the water.

YOUNG EMMA

I was just wondering if this is
real. I'd like it to be real.

She watches her hand in the water.

YOUNG EMMA (CONT'D)

I'm scared, dad.

TOM

Em, you're here, with me.

YOUNG EMMA

But I'll have to go back.

TOM

But right now, you're here.

Emma looks into the water.

YOUNG EMMA

I'm sorry.

TOM

For what?

YOUNG EMMA

The way I took myself away from you.

TOM

Don't regret, Em. That's what ghosts really are. All the things we might have done.

INT. THE BEACH HOUSE KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jack, Chris and Josie are finishing their meal. Josie watches the two men exclude each other. Chris takes his plate to the dishwasher.

CHRIS

You'll have to excuse me. I have Skype conference scheduled for seven thirty.

He exits.

JACK

I hear you're a talented artist.

Josie is acutely uncomfortable with this second hand praise.

JOSIE

I like painting.

JACK

You know your grandmother was an artist.

He catches himself.

JACK (CONT'D)

Is an artist.

JOSIE

Dad told me. He said she was famous.

JACK

She is. Do you see those two paintings?

He gestures to two large expressionist oils on the wall.

JACK (CONT'D)

Those are Emma's. When we met, she was at art school. I was just starting out as a lawyer. Those were the first of her paintings that I saw. I bought them at an exhibition.

For this first time, he smiles, remembering.

JACK (CONT'D)

I have to admit that even though they are wonderful paintings, I actually bought them simply to have an excuse to meet Emma. She was very annoyed when she found out. You see, I was a bit of a philistine back then. I came from a home where the only thing on the wall was a calendar and a form guide.

He brings himself out of the memory, and starts to clear the table.

JACK (CONT'D)

Anyway, to cut a long story short, she forgave me and I learned about art. That beautiful young woman in the painting on the left? That's your grandmother at twenty four.

And Josie is transfixed by the painting of a beautiful young woman who was once her grandmother now dying in the room down the hallway.

EXT. SURREAL SEASCAPE - NIGHT

Blackness becomes dark water, shifting, restless, slipping.

EMMA OS

(a whisper)

The sea, the sea, the smoked glass sea, keeper of secrets. Will you show me now? What price must I pay?

And she's on the boat with her father.

TOM

We oughta go and have a look at
that island some time.

EMMA

Are there kakapos there?

TOM

Reckon there might be.

Her eyes follow her fishing line into the dark water.

EMMA

All the time I've lived here, I've
never set foot on that island. I
always meant to. You always think
Another Day, then one day comes
along for everyone when there's no
Another Day.

EXT. COASTAL LANDSCAPE -DAY

And the fishing line becomes another line, paler - the road
behind the coast, cut precariously into the hard orange clay
of the hills. On the road, Chris and Josie's hire car,
stirring the dust to chalky mist.

EMMA OS

I wish for this. I wish to dream of
flying. To disappear into the sun.

Her own voices answers, but it's different. Unforgiving, cold,
with an edge of mockery.

EMMA 2 OS

Like Icarus?

EMMA OS

No, not like Icarus.

EMMA 2 OS

Or perhaps like the butterflies the
Celts thought were the restless
ghosts of dead children? Or had
you forgotten that?

END OF SCRIPT EXCERPT

Research Statement

Research background

Adaptation remains a contentious area of scholarly debate, nowhere more so than with the issue of fidelity – the “faithfulness” of the adaptive work to the source work, a concept widely discredited in the academic world, not least by scholars Robert Stam (2005) and Linda Hutcheon (2013). The modern novel of the inner consciousness (Goldberg 1963) has presented unique problems for writers seeking to adapt these narratives to the externalised, multitrack medium of the screen (Stam 2005). This work interrogates the concept of fidelity by attempting to find equivalencies for the literary tropes of the modern novel in the aural and semiotic tropes of a screen narrative.

Research contribution

The adaptation of *Flying* engages with fidelity as a multi-trace concept through the exploration of an translative process employing literary, dramatic and semiotic tropes. The novel (now at fifth draft) has created a dynamic relationship between book and screenplay, wherein each is both original and palimpsest. “Faithfulness” has been redefined in terms of authorial intention, a subjective perception of the “truth” of the work as a single entity comprising both novel and screenplay. Adaptive developments of character and counterpoint narration in the screenplay have been incorporated into the novel, developed further, and reflected back into the adaptation in a continuing process of reflexive intertextuality.

Research significance

Interrogating the traditional relationship between source and palimpsest text, and reframing the creative paradigm as an intertextual process, has significant implications for writers working in a creative and commercial context that is increasingly unitary. For scholars, this screenplay-as-research presents an exploration of the fidelity question framed as a process of reflexive intertextuality, where fidelity is not ‘owned’ by novel or screenplay, but rather remains fluid between the two modalities.

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