Re-Evaluating Fidelity: Film Adaptation in the Language Arts Classroom

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It is a truth universally acknowledged by English teachers, that a literary text, in the possession of a film adaptation, must always be in want of salvation. That we as English instructors have a tendency to privilege the written text over the visual text is not terribly surprising; the written word is, after all, the main tenet of our chosen profession. However, as careful observers of our students, we must also acknowledge that our students are more likely to spend their narrative choices on film rather than literature: television and film are the preferred narrative media of the moment. As bibliophiles, we inherently fear this shift; but as instructors, we have the responsibility of helping our students become critical viewers of visual narratives.

Historically, English instructors have often used film to support student comprehension of literary texts. Obligingly, the film industry has always had a ready supply of cinematic adaptations of classic literature at hand. Louis Giannetti in *Understanding Movies* outlines three main types of film adaptation: literal, faithful, and loose adaptation (390-394). Although these definitions are relatively simple to apply, they belie the range of adaptations available, and tend to privilege the "faithful" texts over any others. The purpose of this discussion is to expand on these standard definitions of adaptation, and to demonstrate that all styles of adaptation have critical uses in the language arts classroom.

Introducing Film into the English Classroom

Before any serious consideration of film can take place in the classroom, students and teachers alike need to overcome the notion that film is inherently easier or less valuable to work with than literature. Films are too often viewed as filler or rewards by instructors, and a time for napping by students. In order to become critical viewers of film, students require instruction in the terms and techniques of the medium. Just as we would hesitate to set students free on a novel or play without prior knowledge of its conventions, so should we prepare them for rigorous work with film.

Teasley and Wilder's *Reel Conversations* (1997) suggests a focused, accessible three part analysis of film. It begins with the most familiar aspects of literary analysis: setting, character, plot, theme, and symbol. Then it adds the dramatic elements of acting, set design, costumes, and make-up, of which students should already have some prior knowledge. The truly "new" vocabulary for most students will be in the third element of film—the cinematic. This includes the photography, editing, special effects, and sources of sound in a film. These technical aspects are often overlooked in film viewing and reviewing alike; a film edited for visual and aural continuity, as most Hollywood films are, will not draw outward attention to these techniques. Students are likely aware of these elements in some fashion, but have not formally considered their significance in the creation of film narrative. Once students have a working knowledge of these cinematic elements, they actually have three specific ways to read each film. I over-emphasize for my students' benefit that this three tiered analysis, coupled with the pre-determined pace of a film's narrative, demands more conscious effort on the part of the viewer than reading a written text. This style of viewing is demanding, thoughtful, and important: students will have to stay awake in order to complete it . (Teasley and Wilder 14-46)

Because Teasley and Wilder place such an emphasis on use of film for film's sake, they suggest that adaptations of texts read in their entirety should be avoided in their cinematic entirety (134). I agree with this theory to some extent: this type of viewing can be a redundant and mind-numbing activity without doubt. Furthermore, it can serve to undermine the value of film as an independent art form in its own right, and the corresponding development of the visual literacy which film merits. But the occasion of an

adaptation of a literary text has a lot more to offer than redundancy, and I believe can be the site of much critical inquiry. An examination of some particular styles of adaptation and their uses can serve to illustrate this point.

The Literal Adaptation: A True Lack of Fidelity

Although students, teachers, and critics alike often lament any changes made to a cherished literary text, the most criminal of adaptations has to be that which avoids interpretation in an ironic attempt to remain faithful to the original text. The literal adaptation does its best to stay true to the text by hanging upon its every word, but as a result usually fails to become a film in its own right. The uses of such films are minimal at best; they serve mainly as inputting devices in lieu of reading certain texts. For example, as stated in the course handout, Critical Borders "drama usually presents itself to the objective or communal view of a large audience" (Critical Borders 82); thus, a literal adaptation of a play can be a useful strategy to aid student comprehension of the physical embodiment of characters, action, and space. This is especially useful with Shakespearean plays because of the additional complication students can have with the language of the play itself. The series of BBC productions of Shakespeare are such examples—but they are not films as much as they are filmed versions of plays, and even the best of them lack the power that a live version of the play could bestow.

The literal adaptation of a novel or short story proves an entirely different creature. In shifting a prose text to a performed text, the main hurdle becomes the ability to re-create a narrative point of view. Literal adaptations of prose texts tend to eliminate the narrative voice by simply presenting the dialogue and actions described by the narrator. Some aspects of the narrator's point of view may be supplied by either first or third person voice-over, but this techniques remains verbal—not visual, and therefore not filmic. Admittedly, these dramatizations of prose narratives do provide the addition of actors and spaces through which to tell the story. But they also inevitably remain filmed dramas, not films. For example, the 1972 BBC version of Jane Austen's *Emma* is approximately four hours long and done in this style of filmed drama. Shot on video for television, it very thoroughly covers every conversation and scene of action from the novel. But it is also thoroughly dull. Indeed, boredom is one of the main motivations of Emma's plotting and matchmaking; but the reader of the text is relieved of the tedium through the intimacy that Austen's chiding narrative voice affords. The BBC version does not even allow the use of a first person voice-over to fill in some of Emma's thoughts. Thus, at the climatic moment of the text when the heroine realizes her true love for Mr. Knightley, the most attention given to the audience's need for psychological information about Emma's feelings is to see her through a rain-splattered window. The main character becomes almost incomprehensible, and the moral sensibility of the novel as a satire and Bildungsroman is lost.

In the case of these literal adaptations, the best course of action is to use them minimally, as is suggested by Teasley and Wilder. If the purpose is to help students understand the action of the story, these may be useful dramatic texts in part or whole. But they should not replace true films as legitimate texts for study, and could likely undermine an instructor's desire to promote film as art. The most valuable way to use literal adaptations would be in a discussion of film technique itself. A comparison of a scene from a literal adaptation and one or more non-literal adaptations (such as the multiple versions of Emma or Hamlet readily available) would allow students access to the variety of techniques that a film director may use to create visual meanings analogous to verbal ones.

Faithful Adaptations: A Wider Range of Possibilities

> "A director can change the plot of a novel, he can eliminate certain characters and scenes, and he can include scenes not included in the novel without violating it. But he cannot seriously violate the theme of the novel, and one thing he must be able to translate into his new medium is its tone.

> If the tone of a work is lost, the work is lost; but the tone of the novel must be rendered in an aural/ visual patterning instead of by the use of descriptive dialogue or other narrative device."
>
> — George W. Linden, "The Storied World," page 163

Although Giannetti describes the remaining two categories of adaptation as faithful and loose, I tend to agree with Linden's above description and the notion that "analogy is the key" (Linden 163) to a successful adaptation. Although the terms "faithful" and "loose" may be convenient, the connotations of these terms inherently privilege the "faithful." A more precise method of categorization which attempts to eliminate a hierarchical view of these texts is possible, and allows instructors to select film texts to pair with literary works that promote a variety of critical thinking activities.

The Faithful Analogy

As a mode of adaptation, the faithful analogy attempts to maintain near fidelity to the major literary aspects of the original text, including setting, character, plot, and theme. But what sets these texts apart from the literal adaptation is the ability of the screenwriter and director to "keep as close to the spirit of the original as possible" (Giannetti 391); that is, they re-create the tone of the literary work in filmic language. In order to do this, the writer/director must find analogous structures that serve to translate the verbal style of the literary text into a visual/ aural one.

One of the most widely admired adaptations of this nature is the 1963 version of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones,* written by John Osborne and directed by Tony Richardson. Although the film must compress hundreds of pages of picaresque adventures into two hours, it is able to capture much of the buoyancy and sarcasm of Fielding's work primarily through its editing. The use of the wipe as an editing transition is prevalent throughout the film. Although more common in early film, the wipe has fallen out of favor in mainstream Hollywood film because it calls so much attention to the cut itself; it deconstructs the narrative continuity that more escapist texts try to achieve. But the wipe's highly self-conscious nature is the perfect transition for a film that needs to capture the style of an 18th century narrator. The novel was just emerging from its early epistolary mode, and still did not know exactly how to account for the presence of an omniscient third person narrator. Thus Fielding's narrator is highly aware of his role as storyteller, and openly comments on the behavior of the characters. The film version uses a variety of different wipes that often serve as commentary, as much as transition: one looks like doors sliding closed, then opening on a different (usually less objectionable scene); a spiral wipe suggests chaos; and a keyhole wipe serves to close in on a suspicious character spying on Tom. These wipes, coupled with some third person voice-over, are able to create a narrative voice for this film that is both verbal and cinematic, as well as a close analogy for the tone and style of the original text. (See Battestin's "Osborne's Tom Jones: Adapting a Classic" for a complete analysis of this adaptation's success.)

Admittedly, although *Tom Jones* is a fascinating example of an analogous adaptation, most secondary English instructors probably aren't using either text in the classroom. There are several adaptations of Jane Austen's novels and Shakespeare's plays, all more commonly taught, that also have excellent analogous adaptations. The 1940 version of *Pride and Prejudice,* written by Aldous Huxley and Jane Murtin, directed by Robert Z. Leonard, and starring Lawrence Olivier, is not the most cinematic film, but it has captured much of the satiric tone through superb writing and dramatic performances. The 1996 version of *Emma,* written and directed by David McGrath and starring Gwenyth Paltro makes excellent use of a variety of cinematic techniques to re-create the sparkling tone of Austen's novel. It uses some voice-over in both first and third person, but the majority of the tone is created through the camera work, music, and editing. Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* captures the passion and violence of 16th century Verona best through its music and visual imagery. Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) uses

flashbacks from the *Henry IV* plays and gruesome slow-motion depictions of war to problematize the issues of leadership. Conversely, Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) manages to create a lusty, sunny comedy through its "giddy" panoramic shots of the Tuscan countryside and musical score.

Any of the above texts could be used within the English classroom alone or paired with the original texts. Alone, these films can be used to access the literary aspects of the original, as well as to examine the film's dramatic and cinematic elements. If paired with an original text, or even select passages from an original text, they offer students a unique perspective from which to examine the relationship between literature and film. As students start to identify the analogous relationships between verbal and visual/aural structures, they should ultimately be able to start creating their own analogies for literary texts through scripts, dramatic performances, or filmed performances of individual scenes.

The remaining categories of adaptation all fall into the category that Giannetti describes as "loose." However, all of these following styles also remain faithful to the original text in very significant ways. As Linden asserts, these films attempt to recreate the tone or theme of a particular text, but these adaptations may also search for analogous structures in setting and/or language. Additionally, they may narrow the thematic focus of an original text in order to comment in more depth on one ideological premise. All of these adaptations have fidelity to the original text to some degree, but purposefully undertake a revision of it in order to create a new artistic statement. As such, these texts perhaps have the most potential for English instructors to pair with complete original texts, precisely because none mean to serve as a cinematic equivalent.

The Displaced Setting

Teasley and Wilder acknowledge that "displaced" adaptations have more salient use in the classroom than do their more faithful counterparts. Although they suggest a fairly inclusive definition of displacement, in this case "displaced" refers only to films that have chosen to alter the setting, but still utilize the original language of the literary text. This practice of displacing the setting is commonly applied to Shakespeare's plays both on stage and screen in order to preserve the effect of their poetry, while suggesting a more contemporary relevance. Most frequently, these plays are re-set in modern or contemporary times, and as such, suggest the universality of the themes from the original text. For example, the 1995 version of *Richard III,* directed by Richard Locraine, and adapted by Locraine and Ian McKellen, situates the play in the 1930's; this suggests the fascist regimes that were rising in Europe at the time. The message becomes apparent: "behind the robes and scepters of the British monarchy lies the potential for tyranny, corruption, and fascism as ruthless and dictatorial as anything the Nazis could concoct" (Erksine and Welsh 285).

The best of these displaced adaptations also use a cinematic style that corresponds to the contemporary setting. Baz Luhrmann's 1996 William Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* is an excellent case in point. The scene has been moved to a sultry urban center in the present day where contemporary youth are immersed in a world of violence, sex, and drugs. The modern setting had already been suggested by *West Side Story,* but Luhrmann's vision also utilizes the visual language of these youth by shooting and editing the film in the disorienting fast-paced style of MTV, and incorporating a corresponding soundtrack. More recently, Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) tries to imitate Luhrmann's success; it places the melancholy Danish prince as an aspiring filmmaker in New York City, trying to stop the uncle who has usurped control of his father's Denmark Corporation. Ethan Hawke, the perennial brooding Gen Xer, makes a logical casting choice in the lead. This Hamlet's filmmaking career provides the context for many of his soliloquies, the play within a play, and some interesting cinematography and editing: he delivers the "To be or not to be" speech in the action adventure section at Blockbuster video, an ironic reminder that Hamlet is anything but the typical action hero. However, this film as a whole doesn't seem to translate as smoothly as Romeo and Juliet into the contemporary world (the final duel seems totally out of character for this Hamlet), and the film is significantly marred by awkward cutting of the script.

Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999) takes displaced settings once step further, using a mix of imagery from ancient Rome, the 1930's, and a post-apocalyptic future to extend Shakespeare's most violent play into a piece for all eras. While Taymor's nightmarish visual style is fascinating, the brutality of this film is both nauseating and almost ridiculous, making it too graphic for many classrooms. Nonetheless, each of these texts offer students the opportunity to find the connections and disparities between Shakespeare's world and our own, and to experience how cinematic style creates atmosphere and tone.

The Acculturated Adaptation

The acculturated film adaptation of a literary text uses the general characters, plot, and themes of the original text, but shifts both language and setting into a new context. These films often suggest the same universality of theme as the displaced setting adaptation, but additionally have the task of creating verbal, visual, and/or aural analogies that bridge two cultures.

Akira Kurosawa's two Shakespearean adaptations, *Throne of Blood* (1957, based on *Macbeth*) and *Ran* (1985, based on *King Lear*) give students examples of a text translated from Western to Eastern civilization. This provides an occasion to compare the culture and cinematic style of both traditions. *Ran* (translated as chaos) takes the story of Lear's tragedy, and places it in the midst of 16th century Japan, a time of political instability when feudal war lords battled for control of territory. When the Lear character, Hidetora, decides he wishes to retire, he attempts to divide his land between his three sons. The heirs in this case must be male, as Japanese culture forbids female succession. The sexual perversity and scheming of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund is personified by the Lady Kaede, who manipulates the two older brothers out of revenge for her father's death at Hidetora's hands. The other female character, Lady Sue, represents the innocent, silent suffering of a model wife. Thus, the cultural attitudes toward women in Japan can be compared to Western stereotypes. Even more compelling than the changes in characterization, is Kurosawa's visual style. The visuals suggest Noh theater—a quiet, highly stylized Japanese dramatic dance form. Kurosawa utilizes a static camera, vibrant color iconology, as well as silence itself, to suggest a meditation on the death and destruction that ensues.

Back in Hollywood, there has been a recent movement toward acculturated adaptations of classic texts specifically for the adolescent market. *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger 1998) is a modern version of *The Taming of the Shrew* set in a suburban high school. Much of the original plot structure remains, as does much of the latent misogyny. Students who are familiar in the play could look at both plot and themes of this story to identify the ways in which Shakespeare's story does and does not operate in today's world.

An even more successful example is Amy Heckerling's 1995 version of *Emma, Clueless,* set in a Beverly Hills high school. Heckerling's genius is to bring the audience in as a privileged confidante to the heroine, Cher, while maintaining the satiric distance of Austen's narrative voice. Cher narrates her own story, but with such openness and blindness to her own faults that the audience cannot help but laugh and be charmed at the same time. Verbally, no one would ever be able to re-create Austen's slyly mocking tone as she describes Mrs. Elton, but neither can one approximate Cher's "Whatever!" or "As if!" on the page. Heckerling also maintains Austen's characterization through taste and manners: Elton, the fop, is defined by listening to the overly romanticized rock group, The Cranberries, and his snobbishness; Christian (Frank Churchill) reveals his sexual orientation through his love of Spartacus and vintage 1950's fashion; Amber (Mrs. Elton) wears ridiculously gaudy outfits that scream "look at me." The attention to verbal, visual, and aural detail in the film provides a multitude of opportunities for students to continue exploring the analogous relationships Heckerling has created based on Austen's work. Plus, students' familiarity with this film text can provide a motivating factor for a close reading of Austen's text.

The Politicized Adaptation

Often times writers and directors approach adaptations with the intention of providing a specific ideological interpretation of the original text. To a large extent, all interpretation is inherently political: the most literal adaptation's privileging of verbal fidelity over visual analogy is certainly ideological; as are radical adaptations which focus their attention on the visual aesthetics of a film over the narrative coherence. But some adaptors take special interest in openly displaying their critical positions. These texts are ripe to use as a means to examine multiple critical perspectives such as feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and multiculturalism. (See Deborah Appleman's *Critical Encounters* on the use of literary theory in the high school classroom.)

For example, some films are crafted with the intention of rousing nationalistic feelings. Laurence Olivier's 1944 version of *Henry V* was commissioned by the Ministry of Information during World War II, and can be read as an example of war time propaganda (Erskine and Welsh 151). It presents the story of King Harry fighting his battle for France without the least hint of irony or ambiguity. Any aspect of Henry's character, or war itself, that might be construed as negative is eliminated in favor of a fairy tale-like sense of romanticism and chivalry. Scenes from Olivier's version would be aptly paired with Branagh's 1989 version to highlight the differences in interpretation.

Other politicized adaptations present a more progressive view of their original texts. Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1998) takes Austen's most silent heroine, Fanny Price, and gives her a voice of her own. In this feminist/ Marxist approach to the text, Fanny becomes a writer, and uses her literary talent to express her criticism of the hypocrisy she sees around her. Fanny's stories are actually taken from Austen's juvenilia, and often recited through direct address to the camera. Additionally, the issues of class and race are developed in this adaptation. Fanny's birth family must send her off to live with rich relatives because they cannot afford to educate her in any way. Her rich cousins, the Bertrams, have made their fortune off of a plantation in Antigua, and images of slavery frequent appear in the film. Fanny is disgusted with both her cousins' behavior, and the origins of their wealth, and attempts to leave it behind. The film suggests, even more strongly than Austen does, that the moral corruption within the Bertram family is inherently linked to their corrupt money. These multiple ideological readings within the film version serve to highlight issues that abound in Austen's text, albeit often more subtle ways. In this way, the film may actually allow students to see critical lenses at work through a visual re-reading of the text.

The Hollywood-ized Adaptation

The Hollywood-ized adaptation is a particular sub-genre of the politicized one. The ideology behind these films is a by-product of the film industry's desire for a mass commercial appeal, as well as a conservative American world view espoused by the film production companies. These films tend to alter character, plot, and theme in order to create a story that is easily palatable, and therefore often lacking in complexity, irony, and/or ambiguity. These films permit an examination of particular American ideologies such as: the romanticized view of the hero as the "rugged individual"; the American Dream and capitalism; anti-intellectualism; and the American fascination with celebrity.

To some extent, any film adaptation made in Hollywood or during the Hollywood era will have aspects of this style of adaptation, but of particular use are adaptations from the studio era of the 1930's and 1940's. For example, Richard Connell's oft-anthologized short story, "The Most Dangerous Game" is the tale of a big game hunter, Rainsford, who has little respect for his prey, until he finds himself hunted for sport on a deserted island by General Zaroff. The story's ending is ambiguous: although it is clear Rainsford won the game, it is not clear whether he is a hero, or the newest villain. Yet themes of the story are abundantly clear: the message fixates on the similarities between these two "civilized" men's over-generalized belief in Darwin. Both claim that the world is divided into two groups, the strong and the weak, and the weak

exist only for the pleasure and service of the strong. The only difference between their views is that General Zaroff has already applied this theory to humanity, while Rainsford still has an aversion to outright murder for pleasure. The story's messages are even more salient given the rise of nazism in the years that immediately followed its publication. However, the 1932 film version becomes a classic horror/ action story replete with an explosion, a shark attack, a damsel in distress, and a Count Zaroff that looks and speaks like Dracula. Rainsford is a dashing young doctor who only kills Zaroff out of self-defense, and then sails off into the sunset with his rescued love. Although Rainsford still makes his infamous statement ("There are two kinds of people in this world: the hunters and the hunted. Luckily, I am a hunter."), it serves as foreshadowing more than a theme. The ambiguity of the story is replaced with the classic Hollywood message that good will triumph over evil.

Such revisions of literary texts were abundant in the classic era of Hollywood : the 1939 *Wuthering Heights* eliminates the entire second half of the novel and reduces it into an overly sentimental, tragic love story. But such versions remain common today as well. Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990) casts Hollywood heavyweights Mel Gibson and Glenn Close as Hamlet and Gertrude, while the rest of the cast is comprised of well respected British actors. The script is faced-paced, full of action, and eliminates all but the most necessary of lines, prompting critics to call it "outrageously dumbed down" (Erksine and Welsh 142). This film totally eliminates the Fortinbras subplot, and thus any attention to the political themes in the play. Instead, it focuses on this most dysfunctional of families. Correspondingly, Zeffirelli chose a Freudian interpretation of the play, which seems designed to titillate audiences more than offer them a thoughtful commentary on the play. The infamous closet scene is staged as a near-rape, which ends only when Gertrude stops Hamlet's ranting with a long passionate kiss. This vision of the play seems decidedly Hollywood then in its casting, script, and pop psychology interpretation.

Another example is Kenneth Branagh's 1996 version of *Hamlet.* Branagh undertakes the formidable task of filming every line of the text. He does choose to update the setting of the film to the 19th century, but this has almost no impact on the story itself. In this film's exacting fidelity to the verbal aspects of the play, it neglects to provide any unifying interpretation of the text as a whole. Instead, the interest in the film is supplied by cameo appearances by numerous American and British actors, opulent sets, and scenes replete with special effects, sex, and swash-buckling action (this Hamlet actually swings from a chandelier!). Admittedly, there are some brilliant stagings and acting performances at moments in the film, and the desire to film the entire play is admirable itself. Yet Branagh's Hollywood Hamlet has no emotional or critical center, and becomes instead a typical action hero, blond and buff, whom we should cheer to victory.

For students familiar with the written Hamlet, both of these films versions illustrate how Hollywood can effectively mass market Shakespeare by over-simplifying the problems of this text. (See Boose and Burt for a more complete treatment of Shakespeare in Hollywood in the 1990's.)

The Radical Homage

The final category of adaptation is a catch-all of sorts. Its name derives not from its political views, but from the artistic license that these films take with the original literary work. The radical homage takes some aspect of the literary text but always intentionally sets out to create something entirely new from it. Beyond this simple definition, anything is possible. These films are marked by self-conscious allusions to the original text and unconventional use of cinematic techniques. They are often highly abstract, utilize non-linear narrative structure, and may be controversial in language and imagery. Some, such as Peter Greenaway's 1991 version of *The Tempest, Prospero's Books,* are meant to deconstruct both itself and the original text. As such, many of these films may be too sophisticated for use in many secondary classrooms. They are often exercises in the aesthetic possibilities of the cinema, and may be useful to instructors pursuing such advanced topics.

Two more recent films may be more likely candidates for classroom use, as they are both more homage than radical. *Shakespeare in Love* is a palpable kiss blown to the Bard of Stratford. Tom Stoppard (whose previous Shakespearean sojourn, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead,* would also qualify as a radical homage) co-wrote this fictional tale that imagines how and why Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet.* This film is highly accessible for students: its narrative is linear, the tone both humorous and touching, and the art design vividly re-creates Elizabethan London. The main benefit for students might be the insight into the Elizabethan theater that the film provides: the rivalries, the hectic rehearsal pace, the lack of money and technology, as well as the laws against women performing on stage. The film's climax transports the audience to the premiere of the play, where we can imagine what it may have been like to see this now canonical text on opening night.