

Reading the Text through the Prism of the Screen, a Teaching of Literature Based on Film Adaptations

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Received: 28/05/2021

Accepted: 16/05/2021

Published 16/12/2021

Abstract:

In a world characterised by a media-centric culture that influences the minutiae of our everyday routine, the apex of all teachers practice is to think about conformable tools apt to respond to twenty-first century students' needs. Literature as an integral parcel of EFL teaching is not exempted from being concerned with the impact of the omnipresence of audiovisuality in students' daily life. Reckoned to be a potent instrument to meet literature teaching aims, film adaptations have been gaining momentum among a plethora of researchers and practitioners who have been suggesting methods and theories to capitalise its utilisation. In its turn, the present paper aims at providing a theoretical framework to approach the pedagogy of literature through its filmic adaptation that takes into account the issue of fidelity to the source, the intertextual chiasm, the required comparison and the response of the students to the adaptation.

Keywords: Film adaptations, Literature, Teaching, Fidelity, Intertextuality.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is not by happenstance that serious interest has been manifested for the incorporation of film in the English language class at large and the screen adaptations in the teaching of literature in particular. The basic premise is that the filmic versions of literary texts are apt to usher the reticent readers in a comfortable seat that endows them with confidence to engage in debates and elicit conclusions, interact with the text and most importantly develop their critical reading. In order to reach this end, the teacher has to endorse the teaching of literature through adaptations having under pedagogical observance a set of specific concerns. Accordingly, this paper discusses a couple issues that are meant to promote the interaction with literary texts using their filmic counterparts notably, rethinking the issue of fidelity, the intertextual linkage between the source text and its adaptation(s), using comparisons for critical understanding of the content and investing in students' response to the adaptation in favour of the original work.

2. Reconsidering the Issue of fidelity

The issue of fidelity for a long time has permeated the debates on film adaptations of literary works. Regarding its utilisation in the teaching of literature, debates have stalled on which kind of adaptations are to be used in tandem with the original text in class. Though adaptations critics concurred on the matter that fidelity is an impossible ideal -like the impossibility to adapt Charlie Chaplin's performance into a dialogue! - that cannot be used to judge the worth of an adaptation, a selection of the screen version in terms of its faithfulness to the source, in a literature classroom context, seems to be a healthy practice.

In a context wherein students have difficulties to grasp the content area of the literary work, teachers have to select, among the different types of adaptations, the most telling and the closest to the original work. The type of film adaptations that fits into this description is the 'close adaptation' (Hawkes and Desmond, 2006) or the 'literal' and 'traditional' adaptation (Cahir, 2006).

Such adaptations are different from the other types of adaptations in terms of their fidelity in recreating the major literary aspects of the original text. Andrew (2000, p. 32) distinguishes two aspects of fidelity; fidelity to the 'spirit' and to the 'letter' of the source text. As for fidelity to the 'spirit', he argues that it is a ,very challenging task since it includes ,the original's tone, values, imagery, and rhythm'. As for fidelity to the 'letter', he points out that

Fidelity to the 'letter' includes literary structure, which is easy to transfer into a film; such as ,the characters and their interrelation; the geographical,

sociological, and cultural information providing the fiction's context; and the basic narrative aspects that determine the point of view of the narrator (ibid).

A non-exhaustive number of literary masterpieces had been adapted to the screen such as *Daisy Miller* (1974), *Pride and Prejudice* 1995, *Gulliver's Travels* (1996), or *Oliver Twist* (2005). The common denominator among these adaptations is that the directors of these adaptations were to a great extent committed to respect the original texts. Indeed, "the faithful adaptation takes the literary or historical experience and tries to translate it as close as possible into the filmic experience" (Dean, 2009, p. 9)

Besides, though finding some changes or omissions in terms of plot sequencing or story ending are not to be discarded, the intent of the faithful adaptations is to stay loyal to the intention of the writer and to convey the emotions he wanted to be expressed by the lines and the pages and to "keep as close to the spirit of the original as possible" (Giannetti qtd in Malchow, 2001, p. 3).

Accordingly, the criterion of faithfulness serves the requirements of literature class for its close similarities to the original printed text. Hence, it is recommended to use such type of adaptations since it preserves the essence of the original without distortion. Added to the print text, the adaptation can foster student comprehension of the story bringing them closer to characters, themes, tone, atmosphere and events.

However, the teacher can go beyond the confines of faithfulness. The selection of the adaptation depends also on the objectives of the lecture in addition to the issues, concepts discussed and the relevance of the message conveyed by the writers to the student/reader's personal experience. In fact, it is of prime importance to direct students' attention to the way the adaptation depart part from the very letter towards wider horizons. When the film reworks the spirit of the text and exercises its freedom on the original structure, setting, characters and events, as a rendition of the filmmaker interpretation destined to a new audience, the adaptation calls students to make connections between their experience, memories, and associations with other adaptations of the original text. In doing so, after mastering the original text with its initial message, the teacher can select an adaptation, which is not forcibly faithful to the source; with a displaced setting or altered characters. This permits to take the analysis further and understand the relevance of universal issues from different perspectives by a contemporary audience, focusing on the themes of the scenes adapted from the book to find out its undercurrents that are relevant to today's world. Said another way, when the source text is explored through 'loose' adaptations, it becomes more approachable and more accessible as it is connected to the present time concerns.

In fine, for a productive use of adaptations in literature classrooms, faithfulness to the parent text is a key issue when it comes to the selection of the adequate version. Yet, a productive incorporation of film adaptations needs to be dealt with through an intertextual paradigm.

3. An Intertextual Approach to the Adaptation

Suggesting a comprehensive way that seeks to take advantage of the features of screen adaptations to teach literature, in a manner that revives students experience with literary works and draws them in a critical analysis of the work, takes us to advance the potential of treating filmic version from an intertextual stance.

Approaching the adaptation from an intertextual premise begins with treating it not as a mere translation of the precursor text but as a different medium unto itself; a text *per se* endowed with virtues drawn from its visual mode and cinematic components, to be brought in service of the source text far from any hierarchising opposition or degrading comparisons that would lead to the recurrent fallacy “which one is better than the other?”. Assuming such fallacy locates the source text, as superior and in conflict with the film, in a locus that coops the literary analysis far from a dynamic comprehension of the intricacy of the original text, on the one hand, and thwarts students’ opportunity of challenging their prior interpretations which they took as absolutes on the other.

This premise is based on the assumption that believing in a single meaning is an unproductive quest, on Kristeva’s intertextuality theory that stipulates “a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient and texts exist in an even dialog with other texts; in a dynamic of texts among other texts” (Becker-Leckrone, 2005, p. 108), on “the axiom that adaptation is a subset of intertextuality” (Cartmell, 2012, p. 89) existing “on a continuum of intertextual relations. All adaptations obviously are intertexts” (ibid), and on Bakhtin’s concept of Dialogism which stresses the idea that “everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole – there is the constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (qtd in Snyder, 2001, p. 246).

Accordingly, in order to productively teach literature through film adaptations, one has to situate the source text and its adaptation as interdependent texts that cannot be detached from a plurality of meanings. The source text provides the adapter with a material to be read, revisited and then presented in a film. The aspects of the original change in appearance and bear a new interpretation in the light of the adaptation. This latter infers upon the adapted text and the other way

around creating an interplay of influence and meaning, a dialogue between two different texts.

The intertextual viewpoint permits the teacher and the student to consider the adaptation and its source text as a homogenous entity, and to read both forms as two texts in an ongoing dialogical process. Hence, it becomes feasible for the learner to shift between the precursor text's meaning and interpretations in relation to the context wherein it was written, and the interpretations resulted from how the filmmaker reads the sourcebook; his reading is among many readings a text may generate. As such, a prospect to go through the complexity of the text in its relation to the source is provided all in reconciling the interacting meanings. This makes the students actively interpret the text to achieve a richer or fuller critical analysis of the text.

This intertextual approach to 'read' the adaptation makes the students acknowledge that there are other possible meanings and interpretations that can intersect with the one of the source text. Admittedly, it keeps the chiasm between both texts through a bidirectional shift that connects the students with the original intent of the writer, and the interpretation of the filmmaker that they will attempt to consider through a critical lens. Stated differently, being engaged in an intertextual connection between the text and the film makes the students refer to the source which holds a vital position in understanding the work's plot, characters psychology and the message of the writer, to then expand the area of analysis with what the film suggests taking into account the changes and modification that resulted from the process of adaptation. Furthermore, with students intimidated by the inaccessibility of the source text, placing it beside its adaptation as parts of an intertextual grid renders it more reachable; it makes students comparing what they have read with what they have seen and heard, and thus, the classroom frustration does markedly dissipate (Brown, 2009)

As a matter of course, the student arrives at a point where he/she has to understand those changes motivated by artistic choices and their impacts on the source work as a result of a spontaneous comparison looking for parallels and discrepancies between both texts. This comparison is another step towards an in-depth understanding of the literary text based on a need to inquire and justify the changes for a meaningful intertextual dialogue with the adaptation.

4. Contrasting and Comparing the Source Text and the Adaptation

Applying the comparative process on the work of literature and its adaptation for analysis as parts of an intertextual web equips the students with the aptitude to think critically about what they read and what they watched. After getting acquaintance with the literary elements that govern the target literary work

as they, a priori, discussed them with the teacher while watching the screen version, the teacher encourages the students to draw a contradistinction on their viewing log to compare the elements of the book and their transposition in the movie. According to Chatman (1980), this critical analysis of the text in comparison to its filmed version is deemed to assist students' ability to understand the text. It is also a flipping back and forth from one medium to the other that epitomises "the methodical willingness to scrutinize texts again and again, for their open as well as resistant character" (Hartman qtd in Brown, 2009, p. 12)

This can be through selecting well-defined aspects of the text that the filmmaker kept or altered to reach a specific goal such as characters' construction and development, the atmosphere, the tone, the chronology of the events and major scenes. This gives students more tools to understand and interpret the target literary work. However, the comparison must be not a mere analogy cataloging key additions, omissions and alterations which will take the students to the sterile judgmental reaction" it wasn't like that in the book" (McFarlane, 2007, p. 3). The comparison, rather, has to go further in a way to add more layers for a deeper discussion for it takes students beyond the rigid analysis to more sophistication in terms of critical reading.

In point of fact, sitting before the screen to watch the audiovisual rendition of literary work after dealing textually with the elements of the text allows having a load of knowledge, a prior knowledge that enriches the viewing of the film. This activates a natural process of comparison that urges the students to go through series of cross-referencing and analysis of the differences and similarities. In fact, the adaptation entails keeping some parts of the story, leaving out others and modifying what the filmmaker considers able to convey his/her intentions and vision of the text. This may be about the narrative structure when he/she keeps the narrator using the voice-over technique, the absence of the first person omniscient narrator, putting forward characters that were not as prominent in the text and giving different psychological dimensions to them. Accordingly, the "perceived differences highlight the importance of the use of contrasting examples of narrative to illustrate the particularities of each" (Boustead and Ozturk, 2004, p. 3).

The teacher can prompt this process by dividing the text into what McFarlane (1996) labels major cardinal functions, the essential narrative events that reverberate in the text to be compared, then, with their filmic counterpart in the adaptation. This implies paying close attention to the elements transferred, altered or omitted in the adaptation. Such differences prompt acute scrutiny of parts of the

text which were in precedent time skimmed over due to the reticence vis-a-vis the textual nature of the work. Said another way, it is a close consideration of the interpretations generated from the text and the inquiry of the changed features of the text looking for their explanation, justification and their impact on the story. This occurs when the teacher invites students to center on significant implications of leftovers of, and deviations from the novel through a series of questions, from basic to more specific.

Such comparative inquiry can be articulated through questions like what are the parts of the novel that are kept/left out of the movie? Does the film contain additions in terms of plot, characters, events...etc, that are not in the source text? Is your imagination of the characters similar / different to its portrayal in the film? Or is there any aspect that is more prominent in the film?

This kind of questions lead to close contact with both mediums and help to further scrutinise the story in its textual and audiovisual form by asking more specific questions for instance, what effects does the change has on the original message? What is the purpose behind humanizing some aspects of the villain? Why do you think the omitted scenes had to be present in the adaptation?

Comparing both versions with all that it implies put the students at a point of confusion, involved in a process of trial and error trying to figure out possible conflicting renditions¹. This pushes the students to think and ask questions, as said by Socrates “all thinking begins with wonder” and one may also say that all comprehension begins with a comparison. In this way, the students become more inquisitive, a quality of the critical reader/viewer that encourages them to explore the text and develop their analytical strategies and hypothesise about the effect of the adaptation. Moreover, it sends students back to the primary source and gives them the chance to think about, explain, and revise their conclusions. They analyse the difference between the two versions by showing the effect on the story and evaluate the results of such impact which helps in better grasping the details significant in forming an interpretation and asserting a meaning, and not only reproducing what is given to them. Comparing the adapted and the adapting text makes the students adopt what Cutchins call a “ a persistent double-mindedness” (2010, p. 88) which is productive indeed since it leads to develop critical and logical thinking skills, make inferences, form critical judgment, evaluate the intention of the author/filmmaker and proportion their response.

5. Capitalising on Students’ Response to the Film

¹ It is based on the constructivist idea that that learners actively construct their own meaning based on the accommodation of two contradictory information.

As stated earlier, the belief that underlies the implementation of screen adaptation to teach literature is grounded upon the dynamic relationship between both versions. It is based likewise on the assumption that the literary source does not necessarily have to be perceived as “a work/original holding within itself a timeless essence which the adaptation/copy must faithfully reproduce, but as a text to be endlessly (re) read and appropriated in different contexts” (Aragay, 2005, p. 22).

From a reader-response perspective, Boyum² says that an “adaptation always includes not only a reference to a literary work on which it is based, but also a reading of it- and a reading which will either strike us as persuasive and apt or seem to us reductive , even false” (qtd in Brown, 2009, p. 17). Likewise, Hutcheon and O’Flynn (2013, p. 39) maintain that “adaptation involves, for its knowing audience, an interpretive doubling a conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing”

The interpretation of the text and the construction of the meaning take place in the reader’s mind based on his/her experience with the text. This entails a focus on how the meaning is reconstructed in the process of reception. By the same token, devotees of aesthetics of reception claim that literary texts dialogical and ‘visual’ character empowers the reader to appropriate the text. In this vein, Jauss (1982) reckons that:

A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence...A literary event can continue to have an effect only if those who come after is still or once again respond to it – if there are readers who again appropriate the past work or authors who want to imitate, outdo, or refute (qtd in Arragay, 2005, p. 22)

The above claim seems applicable to the adaptation of works of literature which becomes a product of the appropriation and recreation of the original story in a different context and for a different audience by the filmmaker who, accordingly, can be considered as a reader in his/her own right and the text he/she adapts is the result of an individual reading process. This implies that an adaptation, as a response to the precursor text, can be considered as a commentary on a literary

² Joy Gould Boyum is an American adaptation scholar. She wrote *Double Exposure: Fiction into Film* in 1989. She was a student and colleague of Louise Rosenblatt which makes her reader-response background manifest.

work, a genuine interpretation or a sort of critical essay that provides a dialogue between the source text and its interpreters.

In their turn, the students who are reluctant to read the written text, given that the source is difficult to handle or almost irrelevant to them, are more willing to be engaged with the adaptation on the ground that such medium constitutes "a simpler attempt to make texts 'relevant' or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the processes of proximation and updating" (Sanders, 2006, p. 18). Boyum believes film adaptation "allows us a greater critical freedom and personalization of response" (qtd in Brown, 2009, p. 12) making the most reticent students willingly taking part in such kind of exploration of the text. Indeed, a means of entertainment par-excellence *ab initio*, the adaptation provokes students participation and triggers their emotions plus shaping their perception which gives room to the process of response as viewers who read the text through its captured scenes in the film.

Being aware of the nature of the relationship between the screen version and the written form of the work as intertexts, the film can enliven students' response throughout their perception, emotions, and prior exposure to the text. This response is also a result of their awareness of the difference between both texts forms the teacher drives their attention to, as mentioned earlier.

Furthermore, this awareness can help students to shape their response, to know when they identify with the vision diffused by adaptation or to discard it; they become conscious of, as Fish puts it, their own "repertoire[s] for organizing the world and its events" (qtd in Brown, 2009, p. 19). Their response as viewers/readers to the original work is concretised thanks to an interaction with the adapter's reading of it. Thus, students become self-conscious; aware of their own reading/viewing as a result of their binary response to both versions.

Arguably, the adaptation's ability to enliven students' imaginative and affective engagement helps in achieving interaction with the story all in keeping safe tracks to its original source with care about their respective differences in terms of form and content. All these transfer students' response to the film as viewers into responding to the text as readers and send them back to the book. A sort of diegesis that keeps the student's engagement active in creating meaning "by conceptualizing based on the words given on the page or by a conceptualizing based on the diverse perceptual information taken in while watching the screen and listening to the soundtrack" (McFarlane, 2007, p 20), and eventually, contributes to lift up their level of critical reading and analyses of texts.

6. CONCLUSION

Literature and film adaptations, though different in terms of modes of

transmission, enjoy a dynamic relationship that is apt to offer the student a richer literary experience when used in tandem by the teacher. In this line of thought, this paper recommends to approach the adaptation from an intertextual paradigm in addition to invest in students response rather than viewing it as an 'unfaithful' imitation or a mere simplification. It is assumed then that such utilisation of the adaptations offers opportunities to expand students' comprehension, evaluation and criticism of the original text.

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