Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2017 Volume I: Adapting Literature

Introduction

The New Haven teachers (charged with grades seven through twelve) who joined this seminar understood far better than I the attraction that audio-visual stories—movies—hold for their students. Long past are the days when principals or colleagues or parents had to be convinced that films can be crucial texts in the classroom, both to ignite discussion of topics they treat, and as potentially important cultural artifacts in themselves. The premise in the title "adapting literature" insists that films can bring to life (realize) some important "source," and that they then become instances in which that source breaks into contemporary life. Take Shakespeare, everyone's favorite example; his plays are indisputably worth knowing better, something to which every filmed version of them can contribute. At the same time, each Shakespeare film interprets the bard through the lens of its own concerns. The adaptation can be looked at as a document of its society, or of the personality of the filmmakers behind it. Teaching Orson Welles' *Macbeth* or Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* , especially in tandem, exposes Shakespeare to the light of cinema; meanwhile Shakespeare illuminates the values and concerns these film artists express in other films they have made. Even through a Japanese version, students learn to read Shakespearean verse better, since Kurosawa builds staggering imagery of birds, horses, ghosts and so on, all of which strikingly vivify the original language. Students experience a visceral sense of the depth of Shakespearean themes, which Kurosawa delivers in an audacious manner, insisting on an even bleaker conclusion than the original. Kurosawa's world view can be treated with the same respect as Shakespeare's. After all, he became a cultural spokesperson for a society punished for its warmongering, but punished like no nation before it, with nuclear weapons. *Macbeth* 's horrific vision of the violence engendered by dreams of power seems especially appropriate to the Japanese; while Japanese history and imagery can help students plumb the depths of tragedy in a play they might otherwise merely read through.

Our seminar kept this kind of binocular vision from start to finish. Sometimes we emphasized the contemporary version over its source, as in the case of Amy Heckerling's *Clueless,* the re-imagining of Jane Austen's *Emma* in the world of 1990s Beverly Hills High. At other times, we allowed various film versions of classic fiction to probe the structural core of their sources, as in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Wuthering Heights* . We insisted that every case be treated as two cases, every adaptation as the reworking of a source embodied in a certain way, with a certain style. The only participant in our group who was not a language arts teacher (she teaches history) brought this issue nakedly before us via the 1960 film epic *Spartacus,* whose sources are the multiple Roman accounts by Livy, Cicero, Plutarch and others. This film, it became plain, is not only an evocative, if dubious, *secondary document* representing the slave revolt that occurred nearly two hundred years before Christ. Its value to history goes beyond the particular version of events that those Roman historians had interpreted in different ways; for it also stands as a *primary document* of its own moment in American history, which included both the onset of the civil rights movement and the denouement

of the witch hunt carried out by the House Un-American Activities Committee. *Spartacus* is an adaptation of the history of slavery by a writer, Dalton Trumbo, who had been jailed during the Hollywood Blacklist. Thus the past and the present collude in every adaptation, whether from a literary or an historical source. This brings literature and history directly into the present moment.

Our seminar proceeded through case studies that sampled a number of categories of adaptation. Some examples such as *Beauty and the Beast* gave us a chance to look at several historical moments and cultures when this fairy tale became relevant in one way or another: in France just at the end of WWII, in the USA in 1991, and, fortunately for us, in the worldwide blockbuster that came out just this past Spring 2017. Few spectators care if the new Disney film traduced Mme. de Villeneuve's 18th century "original"; more pertinent may be its rapport with its 1991animated predecessor, or with Jean Cocteau's elegant 1946 art film. The fact that all were popular and critical successes allowed us to look more deeply into the expressive properties and limitations of animation and live action spiced up with trick photography. This story's origin is not sacred in the way that *Macbeth* 's is, and so later artists in many media feel quite justified in "borrowing" it for their own purposes and in their own style. Myths operate as part of the cultural pool.

Fairy tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" crop up as the hidden backbone of a great many films, but, as this case reveals upon study, they appeared independently in multiple oral cultures, not all of which wrote them down so memorably as did Charles Perrault in France. We needn't honor Perrault the way we honor Shakespeare. The latter is updated only with great trepidation; whereas the former stands out merely as the most well-known source of similar stories available in Austria, Italy, England, and even China. Fairy tales take us quickly beyond the Film-Literature dyad of adaptation, since there exist versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" and other such tales in graphic novels, musicals, comic books, animations, and TV programs. Adaptation in this light is an engine that powers cultural productions of all sorts.

In sum, fairy tales, always a great resource for teaching narrative structure and themes, may have been memorably formulated in words by specific authors (Perrault, Andersen, the Grimm brothers), but these can be seen as way-stations or plateaus, places of momentary repose, where oral versions found their footing, only later to go forward in ballets, films, and other visual media. Especially when a source lies in the public imagination like this, one can inquire, on the one hand, about the deep-seated issues that fund its fertility and, on the other, about the way its plot, characters, and themes can exercise the capabilities of different artforms, and do so at various times and places. For adaptation naturally elicits questions of comparative media and comparative arts. Comparisons are natural between the literary and the visual, but they can also be made amongst different visual forms. Our seminar engaged with what school-aged children are most keen on: graphic novels, comic books, musical theater, TV. What are the attractions of each, and how does a given "public tale" take its shape within one or several media? One unit delves deeply into the phenomenon of anime, via multiple Japanese versions of epic heroes with clear ties to Odysseus. Students will be drawn to learn about the Greek hero as they also learn about an artform they consider their own. Another unit samples various genres of "classic" literary sources by exploring popular and relevant "re-imaginings" such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* . More than one unit explicitly aims to recover a lost taste for reading via strategies that make the topics of timeless books and tales pertinent and exciting. "Adaptation" is the global name for these strategies.

In the spectrum of the uses of literary classics, adaptation can operate as allusion, or repurposing. One participant looked at the way a fairy tale, "The Snow Queen," was embedded within a young-adult novel. The structure and themes of the tale by Andersen, relatively easy to analyze, permit the examination of the more complex structure and thematic relevance of the novel. Moreover, this same unit located a film adjacent to

the novel that allowed a comparison of themes without any concern over fidelity. In short, we used adaptation as a way into the understanding of aspects of narratology (story and discourse; character hierarchy, plot construction). Looking at stories side by side, particularly in distinct media, lets students realize how they are made. They can be led to retell their own versions of a favorite or important literary work in one or another medium (oral, theatrical, graphic, mini-film).

Tabulating the chief theoretical issues that the subject of adaptation brought up, we found a) ethical problems involving actual or historical people and situations; b) aesthetic problems involving the specificity of each medium/artform; and c) cultural problems of fidelity to—or the carefree use of—a treasured source text. "Fidelity" is a capacious term, capable of interrogating every aspect of adaptation and doing so with a great deal of moral value behind it. The term has come under tremendous scrutiny, providing the reason to look intently at certain adaptations that seem to want to "transform" the experience of an original while retaining its power. Our clearest example was *The Innocents,* the excellent 1961 film made from Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw.* The position that the film had to take in regard to the putative existence of ghosts helped us assess the powers and pleasures of both literature and cinema. Interestingly, this story also became both a play and an opera, though we did not look into these versions. Effort spent examining "transformations" can greatly improve our (and our students') understanding of the original work and of the properties and powers of film and of verbal language to deliver a fiction. We also studied *The Color Purple* , whose Broadway musical version vies with the Spielberg film as a way of extending, even multiplying Alice Walker's novel. The sociology of the various audiences addressed by these works cannot be ignored.

But the stakes of the question are far higher when the scope of the term is widened. "Adaptation" is the name for Darwinian processes by which species survive the changing circumstances of their environment. The word can be found in the cultural as well as biological sphere too. Individuals, families, and large social groups *adapt* during the normal course of their life cycles, as when middle school children must adjust to changing classrooms, leaving the womb of their home classroom and the security of a single teacher. More dramatically, individuals and groups can be forced to *adapt* —or else to atrophy—when history brings them into sudden contact with an unexpected situation. Many immigrant children probably have a hard time adapting to the brusque social mores that operate in urban schools in the U.S.

We concluded our seminar with a thorough discussion of the self-reflexive 2002 film entitled *Adaptation* , where questions of narrative theory, of authorship and originality, of botany and human variability, play out in an engaging, stylish, and puzzling manner. This film helped us realize that the subject of our seminar, a subject which may seem at first as nothing more than a commercial practice in the film industry, can extend as far as you like in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. The units that were written while all these topics were being discussed suggest some of the range of possibilities for adaptation study in the classroom.

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