


Audience Response and from Film Adaptation to Reading Literature

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**"Audience Response and from Film Adaptation to Reading Literature"**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Audience Response and from Film Adaptation to Reading Literature" Klaudia H.Y. Lee analyses results from 3000-plus interview conducted across university campuses in Hong Kong in order to investigate the roles of screen adaptations and their intertextual relationship for developing students' critical textual practice. Lee combines reader-response theory (Iser and Rosenblatt) with empirical data to explore students' actual encounters and experience with texts. While the data suggests an influence of screen adaptations on students' choice and motivation of reading, this interest can potentially be developed into a critical awareness of the various intertextual possibilities that exist in different forms across media.

**Klaudia H.Y. LEE**

### **Audience Response and from Film Adaptation to Reading Literature**

Probably few would dispute that students nowadays "are becoming increasingly attuned to the moving image and less patient with mere words on a page" (Baines and Dial 86). The increasing awareness of a student population that experiences the world through "multiple modalities" has led to effort by educators across the world to develop curricula and modes of pedagogy to create a learning environment that resembles the wider world in which the students live (see, e.g., Adsanatham, Alexander, Carsey, Dubisar, Fedeczko, Landrum, Lewiecki-Wilson, McKee, Moore, Patterson, Polak). Such a concern has also led to increasing attention paid to forms of texts such as film and multimodal composition to be used in the classroom so that they generate the best teaching and learning results. In this study, I draw upon empirical data which suggest a substantial influence of film adaptations on students' choice of reading. The data has been collected in a large-scale language collaborative project at universities in Hong Kong in order to examine the roles of screen adaptations and literary texts and their intertextual relationship in developing students' critical textual practice (see Lee, Gao, Trent, Patkin <<http://www.narratives.hk>>). While the selected interviews presented here were collected in a specific cultural context, I use them to engage with questions relating to the relationship between adaptations of literary texts and their original written form in literature pedagogy. For the theoretical base of my study, I employ reader-response theory in particular Louise Rosenblatt's *The Reader the Text the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* and Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Reading*, when exploring students' actual encounters with literary texts.

Rosenblatt argues that "in aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (25) and "the text is not simply the linked marks on the page or even the uttered vibrations in the air. The visual or auditory signs become verbal symbols, become words, by virtue of their being potentially recognizable as pointing to something beyond themselves" (12). The key to Rosenblatt's theory of reading is the process of the readers' "living through" a text. In other words, it is readers' moments of encountering and experiencing a text that emerges as key areas of investigation. Iser's theoretical position is similar: "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader" (50). Further, Iser contends that the text can only be brought to life through the interaction in a "convergence" between the text and the reader; yet the challenge for instructors of literature or any form of textual practice is always this: when and how does this "convergence" take place and in what way can instructors assist in this process? In *Textual Power: Literary Theory and The Teaching of English*, Robert Scholes argues for the importance of teaching students acts of interpretation by equipping "students with the accepted strategies for moving from following a narrative ('within') to thematizing one ('upon')" (31). Using Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* as an example, Scholes explains his suggestion by asking "how should our students get from 'It's about this soldier in a trench' to 'It's about fear'—or shame, or betrayal, or hypocrisy, or human frailty, or whatever?" (31). Drawing upon tenets of Russian formalism and structuralism, Scholes suggests ways for looking for the "repetitions and oppositions that emerge at the obvious or manifest level of the text" to uncover the "unsaid" (32). While teaching approaches suggested by Scholes provide a useful point of reference for instructors, my focus here is to look at students' actual encounters with texts, in this case movie adaptations and written texts in order to discover at which point students, even without the assistance from instructors, become active readers of "texts" themselves and use the data collected as the basis upon which to discuss student-oriented approaches in teaching literature and film adaptation.

My interest in the influence of screen adaptations on students' reading practices and vice versa stems from the initial findings of the 3000-plus interviews of undergraduate students at Hong Kong universities on their experiences and practices when viewing filmic adaptations and how this activity influences (or not) their reading of literature, i.e., the adaptations' source texts. The two-year project aims to build an open-access digital archive that hosts data is led by the Department of English of the City University of Hong Kong in collaboration of the University of Hong Kong and The Education University of Hong Kong. The respondents, selected through random sampling in open areas of the respective university campuses, were asked to address two major questions: "What is your most memorable English learning experience?" and "What is your most memorable reading experience?" Most of the students interviewed speak English as a second language and Cantonese as their first language. The main strength of adopting narrative inquiry in the research of language acquisition is to "understand phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them" (Barkhuizen, Benson, Chik 2). A semi-narrative inquiry approach has been adopted for the project: such a methodology allows participants the greatest flexibility in generating their own responses to questions asked thereby preventing or at least reducing the possibility of "re-storying" by interviewers during processes of collecting and interpreting participants' experiences (see, e.g., Bell; Josselson). Follow-up questions to these two major questions were made according to the participants' responses. The interviews reflected an influence of film adaptation on students' choice of reading; it has also motivated a number of students who admitted that they seldom read literary texts. In the following, I present selected interviews which contain some of the widely cited reasons behind students' motivation to read written texts after watching the adapted version on screen:

Interview 1. Question: What is your most memorable English reading experience? Student: I think it would be the time that I first read the Harry Potter series because I actually read the series last summer because I finally have time after my DSE examination. And during that time and I realise that this is not the typical children novel because it has like seven books in total and the way that JK Rowling wrote the book is in a very detailed way and all the descriptive, the activities that they're inside the

books are not very mentioned in those in the movies. I think reading can ... and also reading can learn a lot of vocabulary like we all know and our teachers always suggest us to do so I believe that it is very memorable. Question: And then how did you come across the series at the beginning? That means why or why did you choose the series? Student: Because my friends and I are huge fans of the Harry Potter and we watched the movie first and then the story was very like enchanting and we are very attracted to the story and I decided why don't I start reading the books because like I'm as a fan that I have to know all the details in the books and that's why I read it so I read the book.

Interview 2. Student: I will read some books like ... Mostly I will watch some movie, and then I found that movie is quite interesting and then I will borrow the books about the movie, like *City of Bones* or *Percy Jackson* and that kind of science fictions. I think that is interesting when I first know that about that story in the movie and then I will try to find the books to read by myself. Question: Do you think reading the book of those movie adaptations help you understand the story? Student: Yeah, because when you watch the movie you only have around two hours, but in a book it's hundreds of pages. And then you will learn more vocabulary of course, and then you will know more detail about the books. Just like Harry Potter, you will have like eight episode. But if you read the books, it contain more contents and more details about the characters' feelings or emotions.

To get more details of the "characters' feelings or emotions" emerges as one of the recurrent responses students made when asked why they read the written texts after watching the film. The written text in this context is seen as the original source while the film version is regarded as its "simplified" or at times a more straightforward rendition of a text and this emerges as a repeatedly cited reason for a number of respondents who chose to read the text after watching the film. The comparison that students draw, for example "when you watch the movie you only have around two hours, but in a book it's hundreds of pages," highlights the way in which students' curiosity and interest are aroused by the film that then motivates them to read the book in order to find out more about the story and individual characters' "feelings or emotions." A similar sentiment is also expressed by a respondent who suggests that the movie gives her a basic understanding of the plot before she starts reading the book: "My most memorable English reading experience is I read the book of *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* and I watch the movie first and it raise my interest and then I read the book in the English version. I think because I have some basic understand of the storyline and then it's really comfortable for me to enjoy the English because in the book it's with more detail than the movie and I really enjoy it." The three students' responses reflect their views towards acts of adaptation of literary texts and the roles screen adaptations and the written literary texts have played in their English reading and learning experience. It is clear that their wish to understand more about the complexities of the work after watching the movie by investigating "characters' feelings or emotions" signify a development into a more proactive reader than when first watching the film.

The act of adapting a written text to the screen or stage, as Linda Hutcheon points out, often involves a process of "compression" such as "the trimming of expansive plot lines, the removal of much psychological analysis" (110). However, rather than seeing it as a process of simplification, Hutcheon emphasizes the way in which different medium capture, highlight and create different kinds of experience for us: "Perhaps it is the very possibility of telling the same story in many different ways that provoke us to make the attempt. When we adapt, we create using all the tools that creators have always used: we actualize or concretize ideas; we simplify but we also amplify and extrapolate; we make analogies; we critique or show our respect. When we do all this, does it matter whether the narrative we are working with is 'new' or adapted?" (Hutcheon 110). This critical awareness of the conscious choice adaptors make when they turn a written text into another form of representation through a different medium is one which we need to help students develop if we hope our students to treat screen adaptation as a form of creative practice that involves a critical and/or creative response to the original text rather than merely a secondary act of derivation. This is a particularly important factor to consider in teaching literature given that instructors of literature face the constant challenge to think of ways to let students understand that watching a film adaptation of a literary text cannot replace the experience of reading it and vice versa. While this may appear to be an obvious statement, it is not unusual for students coming to class with the belief that they can tackle discussion questions of a literary text after having watched the film adaptation of it.

As Andrew Goodwyn points out, "making use of adaptations to teach literary texts is a well-established pedagogic tradition" (25); however, that some instructors may show the class "a snippet" of the screen adaptation in order to arouse their interest may reinforce some students' assumption that "visualization" is a simple and easy version and that "reading literature is always hard and dull while watching is easy and enjoyable" (Goodwyn 26). It is clear from the interviews that students held similar impression of the kind Goodwyn suggests. To inspire students to consider screen adaptation as more than a simple and easy version of the written text thereby paying attention to processes of adaption one needs to consider the kind of critical practice we can encourage students to carry out both within and outside the classroom contexts. It is students' affective and imaginative engagement with literary texts that could develop their long-term interest in reading (Lee and Patkin, "Building, "Reading"). The interviews have shown that the *Harry Potter* series—probably expectedly—emerge as the most frequently chosen films that have motivated students to read the books the film are based on and a number of students highlighted the adventures of Harry Potter and the imaginative world as key factors behind their choice, a sentiment of which is captured in this student's comment: "Favourite? Harry Potter, because it is the background of the movie ... the world that we can never experience. So it makes me imagine if I am a wizard or something and I can play magic and know how to fly and I think it is interesting and I watched this movie when I was small and until now I still watch it every year on TVB." The imaginative world has created a sense of the "real" that can bring viewers beyond their realm of existence: "We expect in novel and film a sense of the 'real,' a potent sense of diegesis that keeps us

aware of the minutiae of a world that is going on beyond the page or the screen's frame. In both cases the imagination of the consumer is kept active in creating this world, whether by a 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 20).

Despite different media, film and novel can keep alive viewers' imagination thereby helping them to create a world constructed through their perception, emotions, and creativity. The difference between the media, perhaps, could be explained by "the structure of effects" in Iser's terms when concerned with acts of reading and one which is of relevance to the current study: "Practically every discernible structure in fiction has this two-sidedness: it is verbal and affective. The verbal aspect is the fulfillment of that which has been pre-structured by the language of the text. Any description of the interaction between the two must therefore incorporate both the structure of effects (the text) and that of response (the reader)" (21). Iser argues that a text is brought into being through the interaction of the structure of effects and readers' responses. "The structure of effects" that he refers to can be applied to forms of storytelling that go beyond the written text, in this case film albeit the linguistic code integral to a literary text has now encompassed other non-verbal signifiers including facial expression, body language, sound, and special effects. Indeed, it is exactly this awareness of the differences between a literary text and its screen adaptations in terms of "the structure of effects" and readers/audiences' responses which can help students develop their techniques of critical reading and analyses of texts.

The interviews collected for the project are aimed to give instructors of literature a deeper insight into students' English reading and learning practices so that they can develop a reading-oriented and critical pedagogical approach. Thus I devote the last part of this article to exploring possible ways of teaching adaptation especially in survey type, introductory literature courses. The reason why I focus on this kind of course is not only because it is one of the most frequently offered courses at the university undergraduate level, but also because it poses more challenges to the instructor than a specialized course on adaptation. In my own teaching, I often avoid using the film version of a literary text as a tool to arouse students' interest before they read the primary text and this is not only because of my attempt to avoid giving students the impression that the film is an easier version of the text or that it is interchangeable with the written text, but because I believe that we can only do justice to both written and adapted texts if students are to understand that they are two different forms of creative practice produced across time and space. In the case of *Harry Potter*, we are dealing with contemporary production in both written and audio-visual forms. Yet often instructors may use period drama such as Victorian literature in order to situate students in a different cultural context at a particular historic moment: film adaptation of literary classics or canonical texts are more likely to generate "fidelity" debates than popular fiction or other contemporary work (see, e.g., Corrigan 31-33). The choice of an adapted text and the kind of questions raised in the classroom are thus key to pedagogical practices.

The empirical data of this article testifies to Dennis Cutchins's, Laurence Raw's, and James Welsh's recognition that "because our students and many of our best theorists are restricted by the novel-to-film paradigm, they also fail to understand how adaptation can be perceived as a creative process, much less how it might be used as a way of developing innovative techniques of class pedagogy" (xi-xii). Yet while recognizing the various possibilities which go beyond the "novel-to-film paradigm," I believe that it is still important for us to consider it because it is the kind of adaptation that students most frequently come across. Instead of what Cutchins, Raw, and Welsh describe as an attempt to "throwing out the old duality between sources and adaptations" (9), I argue for the importance of recognizing the existence of the source text upon which adaptations were made in order to develop students' critical awareness of intertextual relationships between texts and of the possibilities of transformation and subversion during the adaptive processes. In order to highlight these potentials, I chose those adapted versions of a literary text which defy our expectations: one such example is *Elementary* (2012) in which the role of Dr Watson in the *Sherlock Holmes* series is performed by an Asian American woman, Lucy Liu. The potentials of an adaptation to challenge or comment on the source text are highlighted by Julie Sanders in her *Adaptation and Appropriation*: "Adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text. This is achieved most often by offering a revised point of view from the 'original,' adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and marginalized. Yet adaptation can also constitute a simpler attempt to make texts 'relevant' or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the processes of proximation and updating" (18-19).

Sanders highlights the possibilities in which an adaptation can draw attention to the marginal and the silenced or offer an alternative point of view from the source text. This facilitates to make students aware of possibilities which emerge as some of the main pedagogical goals of adaptation studies. In my own experience, I found that one of the most effective ways to help students gain a deeper insight into processes of adaptation and to turn these into a critical practice is to ask them to create their own piece of adaptation in response to one of the set texts of the course. This can take the form of changes in the point of view of the story, the medium of representation (such as text-to-radio drama, play, video or graphic novel), characterization, re-situating the text in a different cultural context, or to move a marginal character to the center. I often ask students to form groups for this particular project for I believe that it is through peer discussion and reflection upon their choice of text and the various ways in which adaptation can be done that they can develop a deeper understanding both of the source text and the concept and processes of adaptation. Students are not only asked to produce their own creative response to the literary text, but they are also required to write a rationale explaining the theme and purpose for the adaptation, as well as their choice of medium. Upon completion of the project, they are required to present it to class. In this way, students need to consider what kind of "structures of effect" they want to achieve through their act of adaptation and reflect upon their own responses and upon that of their wider audience to the text and the adapted work. This kind of adaptation project is also a

way to further develop students' skills of close reading and interpretation which they have been developing throughout the course. For students can only be able to produce a powerful piece of adaptive work if they have an in-depth understanding of the source text and reflect upon the various possibilities for adaptation. While a number of students interviewed point out the influence of movies on their choice of reading, several highlight the surprises they sometimes feel when the adapted film defies their expectations. Here are examples:

Student: "I read a book called *Dear Rosie* because I like that movie very much. But it's kind of out of my expectation because this book is written in an email form rather than the formal format of book. So it's quite out of my expectation and it's kind of new experience for me." Question: "And why is it out of your expectation? Did you expect it to be like a normal story?" Student: "Yeah. I think it should be in a story form rather than an email form, because I watch the movie and it's not really...The conversation between the two actors is not really in email form. So it's quite out of my expectation by using the email form rather than story form." The pedagogical approaches I discuss earlier are meant to build upon their first impression of an adapted work when developing their critical awareness of the adaptive processes. In this instance, the changes in the form of representation, especially that relates to "conversations" in the book subverts the Student's representation, although it remains to be explored as to the impact of the form at least from the students' perspective on the way they understand and experience the story. In another instance, a student consciously makes comparison between screen adaptations and the literary texts upon which they are based: Student: "I think my most memorable English reading experience is that I like to revisit the books movies are based on. Like after I watch the movies, some movies which are based on original books, I like to revisit those books and compare the books with the movie." Question: "Do you enjoy reading more or like watching the movies more?" Student: "It really depends because sometimes I think the director of the movie changes too much and actually removes many attractive parts of the book. Then sometimes the special effects or how the director interpreted the book is interesting. So it really depends on which movie and which book. I think in general it's very interesting to see how a book can actually be presented in different ways by different directors [when adapted to film]. Because sometimes the same book could be made into two different films in different years." This student's awareness of the possibilities of different interpretations that can lead to diverse adaptation strategies has laid a solid foundation upon which various critical interpretative activities could be developed. For helping students realize the possibilities of different interpretations of a text and developing their interpretation skills are among the key educational goals of teaching literature.

The interviews collected for the project have been used to build an open-access digital archive that aims to provide students and educators a resource for developing student-oriented teaching, learning materials, and strategies (see Lee and Patkin). As the interviews presented here show, students demonstrated a motivation for reading after watching screen adaptations of the same text. Of course, by focusing on the screen adaptation of literary texts, I am not suggesting that it is the only form of adaptation or intertextual relationship worthy of discussion in terms of pedagogy nor is the case that it is the only motivation behind students' reading of literary texts. It is clear that some students are avid readers of literature or that they are interested in reading. My intention is to explore possible ways of further arousing students' interest in reading and critical textual practice based on some of the findings of the project. Once students start to consider the intertextual relationship between screen adaptations of novels and the literary texts, they could be encouraged to consider other intertextual possibilities (on intertextuality in this context, see Graham). For example, they can reflect upon how a text can be inspired by other texts by reading Michael Cunningham's 1998 *The Hours* and/or watch its filmic adaptation (the novel is inspired by the life of Virginia Woolf and her novel *Mrs Dalloway*). Another possible area of exploration is cross-cultural adaptation of literary texts: this area is attracting much attention amidst the recent "global" turn in literary studies (see, e.g., Dagnino; Sturm-TRigonakis). The advantage of using an adapted text produced in a cultural context different from that of the source text is that it could foreground the choices made by the adaptors both in terms of form and content when they re-situate the text in a new cultural context and in many instances confer it with new meanings that pertain to the target culture. For instance, the global adaptations of Shakespeare's plays could serve as good examples to reflect upon the adaptation of literary texts in different cultural contexts (see *Global Shakespeares* <<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu>>). In this way, students can consider the diverse kinds of 'afterlife' that a text can engender, and in the process engaging with various critical and interpretative activities that can enrich their learning and reading experiences. Although selected student responses presented here came from a specific cultural context, they serve as a good point of reference to reflect upon students' engagement with screen adaptations and literary texts and how to turn their interest in "moving images" to an engagement with and critical analysis of film adaptations and literary texts.

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