



Giving Text a Context

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Joanna Oldham and **Kathryn Warder** on book adaptations and print literacy.

Do film and television adaptations of books and plays kill children's desire to read literature? Professor Colin McCabe of the British Film Institute was convinced that, on the contrary, they could help raise levels of print literacy. The research project he initiated, conducted with King's College, London, has shown that the reading age of children working with screen adaptations of books can be boosted by as much as three years. **Joanna Oldham** explains.

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The image and the printed word have always had an ambivalent relationship. In part this has been an argument about high and low culture ? ?Shakespeare not soaps? as John Major summarised the debate at a Conservative party conference. But beneath this statement lies the more widespread anxiety that the relative ease with which a film can be consumed has led to children becoming reluctant readers of books. And with this anxiety has come the contingent concern that literacy levels are falling. Leaving aside the truth or otherwise of this latter claim, the arguments are still not quite that clear cut. Hollywood has always recognised the commercial power of both the novel and the novelist. From F Scott Fitzgerald onwards studio moguls have bought kudos by employing novelists as screen writers. Film rights to novels produce lucrative deals and adaptations of literary texts boost book sales considerably. Even the reading matter of a film's protagonist produces a similar effect, a phenomenon testified to by the sudden popularity of Herodotus after **The English Patient**.

The benefits of using adaptations?

Yet when people read and enjoy a book, the film or serialised adaptation can be disappointing. The director has got the casting wrong or a favourite scene has been misinterpreted or even missed. While this is not an uncommon experience it often limits the debate to whether film, say, can ever recreate the experience of reading the book and this misses the point. The more interesting question for those of us involved in education must be how schools and parents can use this rich resource in the teaching of reading. For many secondary pupils, the first time they encounter classic novels is through watching adaptations shown in school but little research, other than the undoubted motivational effects, has ever been done on the actual benefits of this approach.

And this is the question to which King's College, London, in collaboration with the British Film Institute applied itself. The results were startling. In order to investigate the potential of integrating text and moving-image media for increasing literacy attainment in schools, we conducted a small-scale pilot study, researching two classes of Year 7 students both of whom were studying Charles Dickens' **Oliver Twist**, but only one of which utilised moving-image media in the course of their lessons. This pilot research found a strong positive correlation between the use of moving-image media and the development of print literacy.

Students who were taught using the film adaptations, including the David Lean version and the musical, tended to do better at print literacy, as measured by both national curriculum tests and also by independent ratings of their work by experienced GCSE examiners. Controlling for differences in achievement at the beginning of the project, students who

used film outperformed their counterparts in the control group by an average of one-and-a-half national curriculum levels – the equivalent of three years' progress. Because of the small scale of the pilot these results are only indicative but they do suggest that considerable improvements in the literacy achievements of secondary school students (and particularly boys) might be achieved.

The primary end of the project

These findings correspond to earlier work which was carried out by Channel 4 schools. Here the research looked specifically at the use of their early literacy programme **Rat a tat tat**. **Rat a tat tat** uses adaptations of children's books as part of its format but, unusually, prints the words to the text at the bottom of the screen, rather like the Disney sing-along videos. This means that not only can children follow the text with the voice over but that they can join in with it, rather as the group reading of the big book in the literacy hour encourages them to do.

Again this research found that the books used by the programme became by far the most popular in the book corner. But perhaps even more significantly, the four- and five-year-olds read these books with far greater confidence and were far more sophisticated in their understanding of the books that had been televised than they were of other texts.

Both readers and watchers

What both these pieces of research suggest is that reading and watching can be activities that support and influence each other. Neither piece of research advocates simply sitting in front of a television for a spot of passive viewing by the pupils and a respite for the hard pressed teacher. Both are about finding constructive ways of tapping into the knowledge that pupils already possess. Clearly these are very early studies and we need to find out far more about the means by which we can best use the moving-image to enhance literacy levels. For whether we identify ourselves as either primarily readers or watchers, such rigid distinctions fail to acknowledge that, for the most part, people are generally both.

These trends offer good news to worried parents who are concerned about their children's television habits. Children's television frequently generates books featuring favourite characters, be they Postman Pat or the Teletubbies and, as a result, television and film may actually play a part in motivating children to read more. In schools, at both primary and secondary levels, the uses of media are reasonably well-established and arguably, likely to expand owing to new digital technologies. These technologies will not replace print: the ability to read and to write and degrees of correctness are required by information communication technology including email and the Internet. What might change is the widely-held perception that media prevalence in society and schools, use of adaptations when teaching reading in primary schools and English Literature in secondary schools, is responsible for a decline in reading.

If financial backers can see that the book of the film or the film of the book makes good commercial sense, then it is about time that schools realised they may make good educational sense too.

Joanna Oldham was a researcher on this King's College/BFI project.

See also **Useful Organisations No.7: Film Education** and the review of Gina Pollinger's **Something Rich and Strange**.

Clearing the Ambiguities?

Kathryn Warder on how her class reacted to **Romeo and Juliet** on screen.

It was definitely a bad case of Literature Snobbery which made me avoid the film version of **Romeo and Juliet** when it played at our local cinema. I reasoned with myself that probably the language would be abused, or the choice of such a teenage heart-throb as DiCaprio could only detract from the portrayal of Romeo. The thought of mixing American accents with the poetry of the text sent shivers down my spine, and updating the set could not, I felt, add anything to the truth and tragedy of the play. Luckily for me, my teenage daughter borrowed the video from an already addicted friend.

I walked past the TV. I saw Mercutio in drag at the Capulets' party in a kind of Busby Berkeley routine. And from that moment I was hooked.

The copy which I bought to back up my teaching of this text to Year 9 students of a wide range of ability is without doubt the best aid to both teaching and learning I have ever used and I will try to explain why.

Things that get in the way

There are many things which get in the way of teaching Shakespeare. Surely I am not alone in remembering dusty schoolroom afternoons reading from unillustrated text and desperately trying to remember who's who? Then the language: 'doth' is an immensely strange word for your average teenager. And those long speeches! You've forgotten the beginning by the time you get to the end. It takes a highly skilled and practised reader to bring out emotion in the reading of a Shakespearean play and we are not teaching exclusively high ability students. However, the greatest barrier of all is the idea that because it was written in a time which no longer exists, a play's content has no power to move us.

This film breaks down that barrier.

Passion, tragedy, conflict and violence

Using powerful and clever imagery and keeping almost totally faithful to the text, the film evokes the passion, tragedy, conflict and violence of the play. The characters are immediately stamped upon the memory. In the style of a *Dramatis Personae*, each is introduced by name and relationship, cast and costumed to suggest personality and family connections. Excellent characterisation brings out motive and makes the characters' actions seem real, their expressions and actions affording clues to the meaning of the language.

The division between the feuding families is suggested both by racial difference and fashion choice, and their 'like dignity' portrayed visually through material possessions such as cars, jewellery, skyscrapers, evening dress - accessible imagery, and fitting equivalents to mansions with balconies and the masqued ball. Sound is used to stir emotions, with music ranging from street funk to gospel, underlining mood and atmosphere as only music can, and exterior and mechanical sound, such as the helicopter's frantic beating and the scream of a police siren, create the feeling of danger on the streets.

Love scenes are tender, hate scenes are brutal. This is a very black and white production, and melodramatic, if you like, but it is the film's simplicity in its portrayal of the plot, linked with its sophisticated range of techniques which makes it perfect for a teenage audience. It is a film which sets out to engage the emotions - just as plays are supposed to do.

Emotional response

It is this which makes it an excellent teaching tool. Once children start feeling sympathy for a character, or start to judge their actions as unjust or cruel, they become involved. Once they are involved, they have a reason to read on, to watch, to listen. This emotional response is a key to the teaching of literature, because literature is essentially about people - their lives, loves, successes and failures.

Picture, if you can, three 14-year-old boys - one a member of the under 16 school rugby team, the other two, shall we say, fairly lively characters, and not pupils of high academic ability. They are sitting together, following the text of **Romeo and Juliet** as it is performed on the film. They are completely involved. They are curious to see how the language links in with the production. They ask questions, and want to have things explained. They ask to read the fight scene themselves. I ask if they would like to move to a corner of the classroom, and one replies,

'I'll look to like, if looking like move.'

The study of **Romeo and Juliet** is almost without exception the favourite work covered, when you ask Year 9 students to assess their progress over the year. Almost all want to read more Shakespeare and I am convinced that the use of this film has helped to achieve this.

Now what we need is more of this street credible type of production!

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