

Minding the gaps: Approaching film critically and creatively in the literature classroom

Carlos Reynoso

careynoso@gmail.com

Instituto de Enseñanza Superior en Lenguas Vivas 'Juan Ramón Fernández'
Buenos Aires, Argentina
2010

Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives, for those who were not prisoners of the mass media.

Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on.

Umberto Eco, 'The Multiplication of the Media' (1983)

Nearly 400 years ago, William Shakespeare said, 'All the world's a stage.' But with the invention of the motion picture, these words take on greater meaning.

J. Bone & R. Johnson, *Understanding the Film: An Introduction to Film Appreciation* (1997)

Thank you for saving the pictures. You were right: without them we'd just be left with words, and they're not always enough.

Kenneth Branagh as Ernest Shackleton, in Charles Sturridge's *Shackleton*, A&E (2002). [DVD Part II 0:37:43-59]

1 Introduction

From time immemorial we have associated literature with canonical printed texts – definite, unchallengeable, revered. Traditionally, literary critics and scholars undertook the job of 'decoding' them and showing us the way to their 'right' interpretation. Little – if any – room for creativity was left in the classroom, and students' success depended largely upon their learning and committing to memory the views of an academic elite. Fortunately, things have changed for the better in recent years: we have started to speak of *literature with a small 'l'* (McRae 1991) and have opened up to a wider variety of texts, encouraging our students to *intervene in* them (Pope 1995) in a critical and

creative fashion. Moreover, the printed text is no longer the only type we are likely to encounter in the literature classroom: texts in different media and formats have begun to challenge the exclusiveness of print.

2 Facing the challenge

A great number of the texts we analyse in literature courses have been adapted for film, and several authors have provided us with powerful arguments supporting the fact that films must be regarded as texts:

A movie is a text, and it is similar to any other text, including a textbook used in a course. *Text* comes from the Latin *textus* (to weave). A text weaves the material together in an orderly and coherent fashion. A movie is a text that interweaves sound in any or all of its aspects (noise, music, speech) and image (everything from the printed word to physical action, movement, gaze, and gesture) for the purpose of telling a story.

(Dick 2002: 18)

Let us examine the opening scenes of a film and see how different elements are weaved together in it. I have marked these elements by means of bold type and labelled one instance of each between brackets as they appear throughout the description:

This film opens with a precredits sequence which starts with a black screen, **eerie music (SOUND)**, and a **voice-over** consisting of a young woman reciting the first lines of the Guy Fawkes nursery rhyme:

*Remember, remember
The 5th of November
The gunpowder treason and plot
I know of no reason
Why the gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot*

The music rises to a crescendo, and suddenly we realise **we are inside a tunnel (SETTING)** as we see lamp light glimmering at the end of it. This is a flashback to November 5th 1605, **sepia-coloured (COLOUR)** to suggest a historical event, and it shows Guy Fawkes wheeling a trolley laden with barrels along the tunnel. The narrator has interrupted the rhyme and now reflects on the difference between

remembering an idea and remembering a man. **Guy Fawkes turns and runs as men with dogs approach (PERFORMANCE), but, finding himself trapped, he draws a sword and fights, only to be subdued and consequently led to the gallows, where he is hanged in front of a crowd that disapprove of him except for a woman, who cries as he dies.** By now the narrator has established a link between Guy Fawkes and a man who has lived 400 years later and has made *her* remember 5th November, a man she now misses. The flashback is over and the screen has gone **black** again, and then we see, **written in flames against a black background, a symbol consisting of a V in a circle, and then the main title of the film, *V for Vendetta*, appears across the symbol in red lettering (PRINT)**, foreshadowing bloody revenge.

In the next scene, a TV is on beside a figure who is about to don a **mask**. The use of **subjective camera (CAMERA MOVEMENT)** for a moment allows us to see the inside of the mask as it is lifted to cover the figure's face; once the mask has been fitted, we can see through its eye holes into the mirror in front, where its outer side is reflected, and we find out it is a grinning mask with a moustache and a goatee beard. Then **the camera goes objective again** and, by means of a **tracking shot**, takes us to **a room somewhere else**, where a beautiful young woman is **applying lipstick and putting on a black dress (COSTUMES)** in front of the mirror over her dressing table, next to a TV that is also on. The camera **crosscuts** between the masked figure and the young woman, presenting two actions happening at the same time – in this case, two people getting ready to go out. The figure grabs some daggers and puts on a black cape. The woman gets fed up with the man talking on TV and turns it off, then she looks at the clock, swears and grabs a piece of paper.

Crosscuts – or **parallel cuts** – are also used at the beginning of the following scene, where the camera **closes up on** the young woman's shoes and the masked figure's boots, as both are **walking the streets at night** in opposite directions, suggesting they will eventually meet...¹

In the opening scenes of *V for Vendetta*, sound, setting, colour, performance, print, camera movement and costumes mesh seamlessly. The same elements that make up the opening keep reconstituting themselves throughout the film, making *V for Vendetta* a true film text.

According to Sergio Wolf (2001: 16), since literature was the dominating mode of narration until the 19th century, it served, in the origins of cinema, as a supplier of stories [and it still does nowadays]. If we agree that films are texts and we take into account the tight relationship that film has held with literature since its beginnings, why

¹ This description has been modelled on Bernard Dick's description of the opening scenes of the film *Shakespeare in Love* (Dick 2002: 19-21). A glossary of the technical terms used here can be found in the appendix.

is it that we still find the idea of incorporating film into a literature course rather daunting?

Rob Pope acknowledges the close relationship between literature and film:

... there is a noticeable tendency for English departments to incorporate more and more video and films into their courses. Sometimes this is a kind of optional extra, the occasional showing of the film of a Shakespeare play or a TV adaptation of an Austen or Dickens novel, for instance.

(2002: 45)

This raises our awareness that the two disciplines (i.e. literature and film) can be brought together in a course devoted to the analysis of texts. Of course one may ask whether they should, and for what purpose. Once again, I turn to Pope:

[The areas of drama, theatre, film and TV] prove both attractive and awkward for students of English, especially of English Literature as traditionally conceived. They are attractive because they challenge the exclusivity of the 'words on the page' notion of textuality and draw attention to spoken words, (along with moving bodies, music and many other things) on the stage and screen. They are awkward for the same reason, because they are not primarily written or printed texts but audio-visual performances, live or recorded. ... Film is now widely recognised as an important element in English Studies. Often this is at the level of film adaptations of literary classics...

(2002: 205-6)

The inclusion of film in the syllabus means, ultimately, a chance to explore and exploit a less conventional type of text, which turns it into a challenging – and therefore interesting – alternative. The next question – in fact the one lying at the core of this paper – is how to deal with it.

4 A review of approaches

Anthony Jennings (1996: 185) regards film as 'a resource which promises to make the study of literature more stimulating,' and then poses a question that I will take as the

starting point of this discussion: ‘what is the teacher to do beyond showing “the film of the book”?’ Before I attempt to answer this question, I would like to consider what showing ‘the film of the book’ actually entails.

4.1 The film-of-the-book approach

When it comes to criticising films that have been adapted from literary works, there is a common tendency – in the classroom as well as among viewers in general – to focus mainly on plot, i.e. what has been omitted, changed or added in the transfer of printed literature to the screen. This can be a rewarding activity if the story told by the film being dealt with differs from that in the printed text significantly enough to make the comparison worthwhile. However, some films are the result of a simple transposition of a story from one medium to another, in which case we are left with very little to discuss.

There is yet another risk that we are likely to run when analysing adaptations in terms of plot differences between the film and the original text. Wolf (2004: 21) compares the analyst in this case with a detective enumerating the clues to the crime: scenes that were in the original text have ‘disappeared’ in the film; characters who had a certain name, said certain things and behaved in a certain way now have a different name, say different things and behave in a different way; the denouement is not what it originally was and the story is now set in a different place. The analyst in this role often speaks of ‘fidelity’, passing judgement and sentence on films that are not mere illustrations of the literary work. The prevailing idea that the relations between literature and film must be studied from the point of view of the former – the ‘tyranny of letters’ (Wolf 2004: 18) – defines film as a lesser art which popularises or simply alters the story or the world created by the writer. Alan Pulverness (2003) gives us a word of warning in this respect:

The 'film of the book' is, of course, an appealing source of motivation in the literature classroom, but unless teachers and students are able to view such films in their own terms – as films – they will always be viewed as inferior products based on literary texts – which by definition have greater merit. ... Literary criticism, of course, has a much longer and more prestigious tradition than film criticism; film thus tends to be regarded by the academic establishment as something of a Cinderella among the arts. ... It seems to me that the teacher of literature who is genuinely interested in using film to enhance his or her students' reading of literature has the opportunity to consider film adaptations as independent texts, adhering to their own conventions and with their own stylistic repertoire; neither inferior nor superior to, but different from, their literary antecedents.

If we are to treat a film as an independent text then, it appears we must approach it in a way that does it justice, i.e. making sure we do not relegate it to a position second to a work of literature. (The reader may ask whether this is necessary even in a literature course. Suffice it to say, for the time being, that we are facing a new challenge whereby literary texts and films share the same artistic status and therefore deserve equal treatment.) It seems necessary, at this point, to concentrate on those features that are unique to film.

4.2 The formalist approach

How does a film tell a story? What resources and techniques are used to convey a certain message? For the literature teacher, familiarising her/himself with the formal aspects of film is no minor challenge, so s/he is likely to question the relevance of such a big task. Bone and Johnson provide a powerful reason to embark on this project:

Gradually, children accept what they see on the screen as real. They do not question the techniques the television camera operator has used to influence the way they perceive the images on the screen. They are infatuated – caught up in a continuous moving array of images that directly stimulates their perceptions with little conscious effort on their part.

Some people – perhaps most people – never progress beyond this level of receiving the visual image. They learn to watch the screen, but they never reach more advanced levels of perceiving the visual image. Most people do not realize

that there is more to watching television or a film than simply letting it pour into their head.

One important objective of the study of film is learning to perceive and understand various aspects of the language of the moving image. Just as people who never learn to read are said to be illiterate, people who have poor visual perceptions are visually illiterate.

(1997: 204-5)

The promise of visual literacy can be enough motivation for us, teachers, to start reading about film language: *mise en scène*, types of shot, camera height and angle, camera movement, editing, sound, and so on. At first it is fascinating to see how these resources are put to work to convey meaning, and one can retrieve examples of many of them from one's own experience as a film viewer. But there is a very important goal that we need to bear in mind in this whole process: we have to be able to teach these concepts to our students, so that they too can become 'visually literate'. This reminder may bring the fun to a pause and uncover a lurking worry: have we really understood and do we feel capable of explaining and illustrating all those film-related concepts we have read about in books? Faced with a negative answer, one may stop to think of alternative, more reliable ways to gain the desired knowledge, being eventually discouraged by the realisation that the task is unquestionably time-consuming, which in the case of overworked teachers may mean the end of the project.

Let us now disregard the previous obstacle and consider a scenario in which we are knowledgeable enough to guide our students through the formal analysis of film. Our next step, then, is planning our syllabus in such a way that enough time is allotted for us to teach our students the fundamentals of film so that they acquire the skills needed for the analysis. There is an interesting case described by Jennings which may throw light on the matter:

Nigel Ross's article "Literature and film" (1991) is a fairly typical example of the formalist approach in practice. Ross gives details of a course which

concentrated on a comparison of the prose and screen versions of *Nineteen Eighty-four*, *A Passage to India*, *Sophie's Choice* and so on. To make this feasible, more than half the time available (sixteen weeks out of a total of twenty-eight) was devoted to a preliminary examination of literary and cinematic techniques. There is certainly a lot to be gained from this, but there is a price to pay too. ... Do we really need to suggest that sixteen weeks' preliminary study is needed, not to understand but merely to lay the groundwork for understanding the films that everyone watches on television and in the cinema?

(1996: 199-200)

Even if we were to devote less time to teaching cinematic techniques, we still would be allotting a large percentage of the syllabus to it, which leads me to conclude that, in most literature courses at secondary and tertiary level, it is simply not feasible.

Apart from the question of feasibility, Jennings points out another possible drawback of the formalist approach:

Talking about form and technique will 'break the spell and spoil the pleasure', and all too often render arid and tedious what might be enjoyable. ... A good reader is not only a reader skilled in techniques of analysis, but above all one who sees the relation of literature to life. ... The overall strategy – the question of *what* we are teaching and *why* – seems to me often to get lost among questions concerned with the *how*. ... The heavy emphasis on technique, both in cinema and prose fiction, will tend to have the alienating effect which all formalist approaches to art produce in the classroom. Readers and filmgoers think naturally in terms of a story to be told, rather than of the means used in telling it. ... When the teacher destroys the fictional illusion by pointing out the technical dexterity of writer or filmmaker, the students' emotional involvement in the story for its own sake is transformed into a detached intellectual curiosity about the artist's skill.

(1996: 186-7, 200)

Whether this 'detached intellectual curiosity' is an inevitable by-product of the formalist approach is debatable, and even if this is true, the degree of detachment may not be the same in all cases and might even be counterbalanced. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that readers and audiences in general 'think naturally in terms of a story to be told' and do not usually stop to reflect on style and technique. If focusing on the formal aspects is neither feasible nor advisable, we must then find an alternative way to deal with film in the classroom. But what about becoming visually literate? Should we be prepared to

compromise? Let us turn once again to those who raised the issue of visual illiteracy in the first place and see what they propose (I have deliberately used bold type to highlight the aspects that I consider most relevant to our purposes):

You can learn to be more perceptive by specifically setting out to sharpen your perception skills. ... Remember to notice the techniques the filmmaker uses to influence the way you see a film. ... Look for these various techniques in the film you see, but remember that **the total film is the primary vehicle for communicating the filmmaker's message. Don't get so bogged down looking for a high-angle camera shot or a panning shot that you lose track of what the film is communicating.** ... Perhaps the most valuable technique in learning to be more perceptive is to discuss the film you have seen with others. By expressing yourself in words, you will be increasing your ability to perceive film. It is sometimes helpful to have a discussion leader, such as **a teacher trained in the study of film.**

(Bone & Johnson 1997: 206-7)

If what communicates the filmmaker's message is the film as a whole, then why should we dissect it? An obsession with technicalities, then, is likely to affect our 'emotional involvement in the story for its own sake', which confirms the drawback of the formalist approach pointed out by Jennings above. Moreover, Bone and Johnson suggest, almost in passing, the guidance of 'a teacher trained in the study of film'. After considering the low degree of confidence that an ordinary literature teacher is bound to gain in formal film analysis through self-instruction, we now come to the conclusion that the ideal teacher to guide students through formal analysis should have specialised training in this discipline. If unable to get formal instruction in cinematic techniques – for financial or time constraints – should we consider ourselves unqualified and abandon the attempt to incorporate film into the literature classroom? Definitely not. Rather than pursuing an in-depth discussion of 'visual literacy' – which may easily take up and probably deserves an entire paper – I would rather focus on the synergy that can result from working with literature and film together and will therefore continue the search for an approach whereby film illuminates the study of a literary text.

4.3 The thematic approach

Apart from presenting such powerful arguments against the formalist approach, Jennings makes an interesting proposal. He outlines ‘a different approach, based on the analysis of theme in literature and film, which does not rely on technical distinctions between the two media, but simply lumps them together as “stories”.’ He demonstrates that, by establishing the dominant themes of both a literary work and a film or films – other than ‘the film of the book’ – we may succeed in ‘bridging the gap between literary classics and works of popular culture without devaluing the former or reducing the discussion to a collection of banalities’ (1996: 190). Although he analyses thematic links between novels and films, the approach can easily be extended to other types of fictional writing.

There is, however, a problem of feasibility that Jennings himself anticipates: teachers may feel that they have to do an enormous amount of research (finding films that can be linked thematically with a given literary text) before they can try their hand at a thematic approach. The solution to this is mostly in the hands of syllabus designers, textbook writers and teacher-trainers, who, after accepting the validity of the approach, can ‘take the weight off the practising teacher’s shoulders by developing a range of topic-based units for teachers to experiment with’ (ibid p. 201). This approach has yet another drawback: it involves spending a good deal of time on books and films which may not even be on the syllabus. Nonetheless, Jennings claims that the advantages of this approach far outweigh its disadvantages:

Above all, this thematic and comparative approach breaks down the barrier that normally separates novels like *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* from the popular culture that is part of our students’ daily lives. ... The analysis outlined above would, I think, not only encourage students to look at the classics with fresh and unprejudiced eyes, but also to reflect on the meaning of things that happen around

them every day. ... it is only by keeping an open mind, by asking the same questions of a classic novel and a popular film, of a canonical and uncanonical text, that our students will learn to achieve an accurate appreciation of both.

(Jennings 1996: 202-3)

As we can see, the thematic approach can work fruitfully with films which differ considerably from the literary text yet have a few thematic concepts in common, and it is consistent with Jennings's aforementioned definition of a good reader, even though it may prove time-consuming and demanding on teachers. On the other hand, if tried with a 'film of the book' where the story has been 'faithfully' transposed from one medium to the other, there will be little to discuss and virtually nothing to gain. After all, how much can be gained from discussing the themes present in the same story told in two different media?

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of the thematic approach, I find its gap-bridging between canonical literary texts and popular culture/uncanonical texts to be its most valuable asset. Therefore, in this quest for a feasible and illuminating approach to film in the literature classroom, I think that we would do well to keep 'an open mind' by asking the same questions of a classic text and a film.

5 An alternative proposal

In every text, canonical or uncanonical, it is possible to identify gaps or verbal silences – something that is not explicitly said, or a voice that cannot be heard but can still tell us something, as is the case with dramatic monologues, where the speaker addresses a silent listener. Pope claims that we should treat every single text as if it were a dramatic monologue:

... in reading [a dramatic monologue] we tend to put ourselves in the position of the silent addressee: full of questions and observations perhaps – but denied a voice within the text as such. Indeed, artfully constructed 'dramatic monologues' such as

Browning's ['My Last Duchess'] tend to produce peculiarly active and engaged responses from their readers – most palpably in the form of a desire to 'answer back'. Placed in the position of the speechless (and often the powerless), we feel impelled to speak out.

The trick, therefore, is to treat every text as a 'dramatic monologue'! For every text – whether 'literary' or otherwise, and however artful or artless – has its muted voices and marginalised discourses. Every text must therefore be 'answered back' with questions it did not propose – as well as those it did.

(1995: 21)

Reading into the gaps and silences of a text is one of the many strategies of *textual intervention* developed by Pope, according to which one must try to see through the textual 'holes' by probing them with all sorts of questions. According to him,

Textual intervention is the catch-all phrase used to designate ... various creative-critical practices... All of them have to do with challenging and changing texts so as to recognise their distinctive strategies and preoccupations; and actively generating differences so as to establish firmer grounds for critical preferences. While such a method is not common in literary studies in higher education, partial parallels exist in cultural and communication studies.

(1995: 185-6)

Intervening in a text implies transforming it and therefore creating an alternative text, which will throw light on the structures, meanings, values and functions of the base text (original text). However, this does not mean we will be neglecting the base text:

In some instances the process of re-writing and intervention will inevitably prompt you to develop characters, scenes and arguments of your own. Consequently and only apparently paradoxically, you will not in fact be led away from your 'original text'... Rather, you will constantly ... be forced back into it. Every turning you take, every choice and combination you make will be gauged against one already taken and made in your base text. The latter is therefore, in every sense, the 'base' from which you must depart and to which you must return. But where you go in the meantime – and how and why – is largely up to you.

(ibid p. 2)

How can we apply this to the treatment of a film in the literature classroom? First we must bear in mind that when a filmmaker decides to make a film based on a literary text, s/he goes through the process we have just described: s/he identifies gaps and silences in

the base text (the literary work), intervenes in it by reading into and filling these gaps, and creates an alternative text (the film), which will surely lead us to a new interpretation and better understanding of the base text.

Now, a formalist would most probably suggest that we teach our students to ‘read’ a film, focusing on the formal aspects of film language, but, as we have already established, this is no easy task for someone with no formal instruction in cinematic techniques. Textual intervention, on the other hand, can be tackled by any teacher working with texts, and not only is it aimed at critical and re-creative (rather than recreative) reading, but it also lets us consider the film as a re-creation of the base text. Its application in our case would consist of two phases:

1. The identification of verbal silences and gaps in the base text, the interpretation of such silences, and the re-creation of the text (or parts of it) as an imaginary film adaptation that reflects the personal and creative reading of the textual gaps.
2. The speculation, based on the analysis of selected scenes from a particular film, about the possible gaps that the filmmaker might have identified in the base text, and the reasons why s/he may have made the decisions that yielded this film as a result.

Whereas not many literature departments may advocate intervening in a text for creative interpretation, it is common practice among actors and directors. There is a powerful tool in film for conveying meaning called the *close-up*, defined as “a shot in which the camera is or appears to be close to the subject (e.g. a shot of the human head)” (Dick 2005: 392). Thanks to the close-up, a person or an object can be magnified hundreds of times, and meaning can be expressed by the slightest movement. This way, the filmmaker can keep a dialogue as it was originally written (in the literary text) and, by means of the slightest movement or facial expression, s/he can alter its meaning. This

leads actors, script writers and directors to a deep exploration of the base text and the making of countless decisions in the attempt to fill its gaps and silences. They have special training in reading ‘between the lines’ and adding a personal – possibly new – interpretation to a certain scene or a particular line of dialogue. They usually refer to the reading and interpretation of gaps in a text as analysing its *sub-text*:

sub-text The ‘under’ or ‘below’ text; what is not said or done. The term has a wide application to literature in general; particularly, perhaps, to the novel and short story, and other fictional genres, and to poetry. A reader tends to construct a sub-text for herself or himself, imagining or interpreting what is *not* said or *not* done (and *how* it is not said or done), what may be implied, suggested or hinted, what is ambiguous, marginal, ambivalent, evasive, emphasized or not emphasized – and so on. In doing all this the reader exercises insight into the ‘unconscious’ elements in the work itself and thus elicits additional meanings. Psychoanalytical criticism involves a quest for such concealed or partially concealed meanings.

The term is often associated with drama to denote the unspoken in a play; what is implied by pause and by silence. And perhaps also what Harold Pinter means by ‘the pressure behind the words’. The term may also apply to the shape of the plot and the patterns of imagery.

Another and perhaps somewhat arcane concept of the sub-text is to be found in the work of two prominent Marxist critics: Pierre Macherey and Fredric Jameson. Macherey is concerned with the ‘silences’ or ‘gaps’ in a text which both conceal or expose ideological contradictions, and he believes that the critic’s task is to reveal the text’s unconscious content. Jameson is concerned with the ‘political unconscious’ of a text: that sub-text which, historically and ideologically, constitutes the ‘unspoken’, the concealed and repressed...

(The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, 1999)

5.1 An example of sub-text

Richard Eyre’s film *Stage Beauty* (2004) deals with women in 17th century England being granted permission by Charles II to perform on stage and male actors being forbidden to play female roles. As a consequence, a renowned performer of female parts, Ned Kynaston, finds himself out of work for being unable to play the role of a man – which, incidentally, holds true not only on stage but also in life. Eventually, he is asked to tutor Maria Hughes, his former dresser and now a young star still learning the ropes. Although Ned himself has never quite managed to act naturally as a woman and

deliver a realistic performance in spite of his acting to great acclaim, he now succeeds in putting sub-text to work in order to guide Maria through an outstanding rendition of Desdemona in a production of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The main focus is the scene in which she is murdered by the Moor, particularly the line in which Desdemona, being accused of committing adultery with Michael Cassio, urges Othello to "send for the man and ask him". Ned claims that there is a good reason why Desdemona does not refer to Cassio by his name at this point: determined to poison the Moor's mind with an imaginary lover for Desdemona, Iago has made no random pick – he has chosen Cassio because, in truth, Desdemona does fancy him, and this is why, at this crucial moment, she cannot pronounce his name. Even if such a close reading of Desdemona's line does not alter the plot, it somehow renders Desdemona a little less innocent and makes Iago appear a little more cunning than he has already proved to be. This may not be the preferred reading that Shakespeare had in mind or that many scholars might try to uphold, yet it throws new light on the characters involved and proves a clear example of how we can probe the text's gaps and experience alternative readings.

5.2 Sub-text in a screen adaptation

Let us now apply this kind of analysis to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Michael Radford's film *William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice* (2004). The following activities would serve as an example of phase 1 described above:

Act I Scene iii

1. Re-read the scene. How does Shylock come up with the idea of the pound of flesh? Can we find evidence in the text?
2. In small groups, imagine and discuss how you would 'fill this gap' in a film version of your own, bearing in mind that meaning is not always conveyed through words.

3. View the corresponding scene in Michael Radford's film (2004). How did the director fill this textual gap?

Antonio is a merchant in Venice whose fortune at this moment is tied up in trade ships that are at sea. Bassanio, a close friend of his, comes to borrow money from him in order to travel to Belmont and propose marriage to a rich lady there. Antonio, then, decides to take out a loan from Shylock, a Jewish money-lender, so that his friend can finance his trip. As they discuss the terms of the loan, Shylock makes a startling proposal: he will lend the money at no interest, but if Antonio does not repay the loan on time, Shylock will be entitled to cut off a pound of Antonio's flesh. At this stage we already know that Antonio has treated Shylock badly in the past – since he disapproves of usurers – but a pound of human flesh has no value at all. How does Shylock come up with the flesh clause? In Radford's film, when Antonio joins Bassanio and Shylock to talk about the loan, the latter is holding in his hand a pound of goat's meat that he has just bought at the market, which is most probably what has inspired the terms of the bond.

As an example of phase 2, we can refer the students to the scene in which Bassanio borrows money from Antonio, and set the following activities:

Act I Scene i

1. Re-read the scene in which Bassanio borrows money from Antonio. Describe the relationship between these two characters.
2. View the corresponding scene in Radford's film. What is the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio like here? In small groups, discuss what verbal silences or textual gaps the director may have identified in the base text that could have led him to this particular reading.

By having Bassanio move and talk in a very seductive way and kiss Antonio on the mouth, the director has yielded a highly homoerotic scene.

6 Conclusion

If we regard films as texts, there seems to be no reason for us not to incorporate them into our literature classrooms. In fact there is much to gain from it, and little – if anything – to lose. As Claudia Ferradas (2002) maintains,

It seems that the single major obstacle in our way (apart from the obvious lack of resources in many contexts) is our own suspicious attitude towards technology, perhaps based on our respect for printed text as the quintessential vehicle of culture. ... Far from imposing limitations on our profession, this poses a challenge in terms of professional development, which must become interdisciplinary. Rather than threatening the demise of the literature class, it invites language and literature teachers to rethink the role of print within a visual culture, as well as to reconsider their own role as the developers of critical approaches to technological literacy.

In conclusion, intervening in a text by means of working on its sub-text can be a fruitful experience as it guarantees constant interaction with the base text, promotes the reading of not only what is explicitly said but also ‘the unsaid’ (verbal silences), stimulates creativity through the re-creation of the text, and enables us to read and understand the film adaptation as a re-creation of the literary text, probing both texts in search of possible reasons to justify or explain the filmmaker’s ‘vision’.

The ultimate aim of this proposal, then, is that we should embrace the inclusion of film in our literature syllabus as a type of text sharing equal status with the printed text, and that our students should, in their attempt to make the silenced voices in a text heard, voice their own interpretation through critical and creative analysis. As Pope (2002: 269) has asserted, ‘every reading of a text, however simple, is in some sense many-voiced. One of those voices – for you the most immediate and important – is yours.’

Appendix

Glossary of technical terms used in the description of the opening scenes of *V for Vendetta*

close-up

Literally, a shot in which the camera is or appears to be close to the subject (e.g. a shot of the human head).

credits

The names of the film's creative personnel (actors, writer, production designer, costume designer, director of photography, editor, producer, director), which usually – but not always – appear at the beginning of the film as part of the **main title**.

crosscutting

Switching back and forth between two actions taking place at the same time, but not necessarily – and, in fact, rarely – in the same place. Also called **parallel cutting**.

dolly shot

A moving shot taken on a dolly (a wheeled platform or cart).

flashback A segment of a film, brief or extended, that dramatizes what has happened in the past.

main title

The film's title and opening **credits**, often creatively designed and an artistic creation in itself.

objective shot

What the camera, as opposed to the character, sees.

parallel cut

A transition from one shot to another occurring at the same time. See also **crosscutting**.

precredits sequence

A segment of the film that occurs before the **credits** come on and often contains information that is vital to an understanding of the plot.

tracking shot

A moving shot, originally with the camera on tracks but now referring to any shot taken when the camera is on some sort of moving vehicle or mechanism, such as a dolly, crane, car, or truck – or even held by or strapped onto a person (e.g. a **Steadicam**).

shot

What is recorded by a single, uninterrupted run of the camera.

Steadicam

A camera that is attached to the operator's body, enabling him or her to move easily into, out of, or around areas that cannot accommodate a **dolly**.

subjective camera

A technique in which the viewer stands in for the character, experiencing what the character would have experienced.

voice-over

Off-camera narration by either a character or a commentator.

Source:

Dick, B. (2005). *Anatomy of Film*. Fifth edition. Boston & NY: Bedford/St. Martin's.

References

- Bone, J. & Johnson, R. (1997). *Understanding the Film: An Introduction to Film Appreciation*. Fifth edition. Chicago: NTC Publishing Group.
- Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, revised C. E. Preston. London & NY: Penguin Books.
- Dick, B. (2002). *Anatomy of Film*. Fourth edition. Boston & NY: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- (2005). *Anatomy of Film*. Fifth edition. Boston & NY: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Eco, U. (1983). The multiplication of the media. In Eco, U. (1986). *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co.
- Ferradas, C. (2002). Reading screens in the classroom. In *Literature Matters* (Newsletter of the British Council's Literature and Film Department). Issue No 32. Winter 2002.
- Jennings, A. (1996). 'Viewer, I married him': Literature on Video. In Carter, R. & McRae, J. (eds.) *Language, Literature & the Learner – Creative Classroom Practice*. London: Longman.
- McRae, J. (1991). *Literature with a small 'l'*. London: Macmillan.
- Pope, R. (1995). *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*. London & NY: Routledge.
- (2002). *The English Studies Book: An Introduction to Language, Literature and Culture*. Second Edition. London: Routledge.
- Pulverness, A. (2003). A raid on the articulate? Using film to illuminate literature. Proceedings of the conference *Reading Screens: From text to film, TV and new media* (The 18th Oxford Conference on the teaching of literature). [Internet] Available from: http://www.britishcouncil.org/02alan_pulverness_a_raid_on_the_articulate-4.doc (Accessed June 22nd, 2006).
- Rowe, A. & Wells, P. (2003). Film form and narrative. In Nelmes, J. (ed.). *An Introduction to Film Studies*. Third edition. London & NY: Routledge.
- Wolf, S. (2001). *Cine / Literatura: Ritos de Pasaje*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.

Filmography

- Shackleton*. (2002). Written and directed by Charles Sturridge. UK & USA: A&E Television Networks, Channel 4 Television Corporation and Firstsight Films. [DVD]
- Stage Beauty*. (2004). Directed by Richard Eyre. UK / Germany / USA: Qwerty Films / N1 European Film Produktions GmbH & Co. KG / Artisan Entertainment / BBC Films / Lions Gate Films / Momentum Pictures / Returning Productions / Tribeca Productions. [DVD]
- V for Vendetta*. (2005). Directed by James McTeigue. UK, USA & Germany: Silver Pictures / Anarchos Productions Inc. / Warner Bros. / Fünfte Babelsberg Film / Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg / DC Comics (Vertigo) / Virtual Studios. [DVD]
- William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice*. (2004). Directed by Michael Radford. UK / USA / Italy / Luxembourg: Spice Factory / UK Film Council / Film Fund Luxembourg / Delux Productions / Imagine e Cinema / Istituto Luce / Avenue Pictures Productions / Navidi-Wilde Productions Ltd. / 39 McLaren St. Sydney / Dania Film. [DVD]

Bibliography

- Aguilar, D. et al. (2003). *La Aventura Textual: De la Lengua a los Nuevos Lenguajes*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Stella/Ediciones La Crujía.
- Anderegg, M. (2004). *Cinematic Shakespeare*. New York & Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bettendorff, M. E. & Prestigiacomo, M. R. (1997). *La Ventana Discreta: Introducción a la Narrativa Filmica*. Buenos Aires: Atuel.
- Burt, R. (2002). *Shakespeare after Mass Media*. New York: Palgrave.

- Chandler, D. (1994). *The 'Grammar' of Television and Film*. University of Wales. Available at: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/gramtv.html> (Accessed May 9th, 2006)
- Dickson, A. (2005). *The Rough Guide to Shakespeare*. London & New York: Rough Guides.
- Film Study Guide: Reading a Film*. Article prepared by Film Education for the British Council (approved March 2004). Available at: http://www.britishcouncil.org/es/argentina-literature-reading_a_film.doc (Accessed August 29, 2006)
- Fraser, N. (2004). *Theatre History Explained*. Ramsbury: Crowood.
- Monaco, J. (2000). *How to Read a Film: The World of Movies, Media, and Multimedia*. Third edition. NY & Oxford: O.U.P.
- Pulverness, A. (2002). Film and literature: two ways of telling. In *Literature Matters* (Newsletter of the British Council's Literature and Film Department). Issue No 32. Winter 2002. Also available from: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-literature-literature-matters-edition32-film-and-lit.htm> (Accessed June 22nd, 2006).
- Rothwell, K. (1999). *Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*. Cambridge & New York: C.U.P.
- Wells, S. & Cowen Orlin, L. (eds.) (2003). *Shakespeare – An Oxford Guide*. Oxford & New York: O.U.P.