

The differences between novels and films

—Enhance literature teaching by using films

BAO Bo

(Foreign Language Department, Shaanxi Institute of Education, Xi'an Shaanxi 710061, China)

Abstract: Many films are based on novels. However, each of them uses different ways to tell the similar stories. The paper discusses the differences from several aspects in terms of their nature, ways of narration, as well as the effect they bring about. It mainly focuses on the special benefits of using films in English language teaching. Finally, a sample film-based activity which could be used to enhance language classroom is illustrated.

Key words: novels; films; English language teaching

In the twentieth century, there are two culturally dominant ways of experiencing fiction available to us: the visual forms of film and the prose forms of novel (Montgomery, et al., 1992, p. 191). Indeed, these two different media have gained millions of fans all over the world. Many literary masterpieces have been represented through films. Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), Ann Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), Joe Wright's *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) are all based on novels. Quite often, people like to compare the novel with the film that tells the same story, and many people are inclined to agree with the opinion that films could hardly defeat the novels in telling the same story. Presumably, on one hand, this is mainly because of the fact that it is the novel that introduces the story to the readers first. Therefore, whatever the author writes in the story occupies the readers' mind and become the only "correct" way of telling a certain story. On the other hand, the paper conceives that the differences between novels and films by their very nature decide that these two forms of media will never create the same effects on presenting stories.

1. Important differences between films and novels

1.1 Formal differences: Visual image vs. verbal sign

The philosopher C. S. Peirce used the terms **sign** and **icon** to explain the relationship between two things when one thing can represent another (Montgomery, 1992, p. 193). The term sign refers to the arbitrary relationship between two things, for example, a word "flower" can be a sign of a flower; also, a picture of a flower can be an icon of the flower which shows a less arbitrary relationship between the two. Obviously, a picture of a flower is much closer to a flower than the word "flower" (Monaco, 1981). As mediums of representation, film is made of icons, while prose is made of signs (Montgomery, 1992, p. 193). In other words, the images in the film have more direct and immediate relationship to what it describes, while the words seldom do. Additionally, the sound in the film could greatly enhance the audiences' understanding. Therefore, it is true that film's grasp of

BAO Bo (1981-), M.A., Foreign Language Department, Shaanxi Institute of Education; research fields: applied linguistics, computer assisted language learning.

reality can seem much more direct and easily intelligible. On one hand, these features of the film make it easier to be understood than that of the novel; however, on the other hand, it fails to describe something which is abstract, more specifically, people's inner world. This will be discussed in detail next.

1.2 Surface vs. interior

Since the camera can only show the surface, the film has to use some other methods to express people's thought. For example, in the first scene as for the ball in Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), the film could show the excited people, the beautiful ladies and the handsome gentlemen as well as their actions. However, it can't reveal Austen's detailed description about people's changing attitude toward Darcy, specifically, how "Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room" at first, and why "everybody thought Darcy was the proudest, most disagreeable in the world", and finally, "everybody hoped that he would never come there again". The film presents this rather complicated course through Darcy's cold facial expression and the dialogue between Elizabeth and Charlotte. Obviously, this is far from enough to describe the proud and disagreeable Darcy. In contrast, the subtle change in people's inner world toward Darcy could be revealed vividly and clearly in the novel. This difference between film and novel actually gives the audiences and readers different experiences.

1.3 Narration

Montgomery, et al describe that narrative film can be thought of as story without the level of narration—a tale without a teller (1992, p. 193). This is actually caused by its iconic nature. The films show people the story, while the novels tell people the story.

According to Monaco, the novels could be narrated either by the first-person narrator or by someone outside it, the omniscient narrator (1981, p. 172). Most films are also told from an omniscient point view. That is to say, we can see and hear whatever the director wants us to hear and see. In addition, by their very nature, the visual images directly display what things are happening when the audiences watch the film. Bluestone claims that "the novel has three tenses; the film has only one" (Giddings, et al., 1990, p. 15).

Consequently, the audience tends to believe that the image tells the truth. Interestingly, as Monaco describes that Hitchcock had one of his characters narrate a flashback which is a lie. The audiences reacted angrily when they finally realized that it was false, because they weren't able to believe that the image could lie (Monaco, 1981, p. 173). However, the novel writers could handle this very easily.

1.4 Sound vs. silence

It is true that the sound of the film could greatly enhance the audiences' comprehension. The film audiences could receive the information from both images and sounds, while the novel readers only from the text. The sound in the film can be classified into three types, namely, speech, music and noise. In some situations, even any of them alone could tell a story. Though as accurate as the novel can not achieve, the sound in the film could create the environment in which the audiences could feel the characters' emotion. The magic of the sound in films is that it could duplicate the sounds in real life, and together with the images, it creates and displays the real life to the audiences directly and immediately. By contrast, the novel could only describe things through words. The film director could show "a successful ball" with fantastic music, joyful laughter, excited conversation and all kinds of noise, but what the novel writer could do is using silent words. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the multilayered film is much more powerful in creating the real life than the novel. However, from another point of view, the weak point of novel can be a great advantage. It is just the silent and arbitrary nature of the signs in the

novel provided unlimited space for the reader. Consequently, every reader could create the most excellent and imaginative “film” in their mind.

2. Films in language teaching

The above features of the films actually have great significance in English language teaching. More clearly, using films could facilitate the English literature teaching. It is necessary to clarify that the “literature teaching” here actually refers to “using literary texts as language teaching resource” rather than “as an object of literary study” (Abersold & Field, 1997, p. 157). The using of video materials could enhance the students’ motivation and provide them different ways of input. Obviously, the learning materials with visual element are more meaningful and alive and help to bring the real world into the classroom.

Stempleski and Tomalin claim that using video will facilitate language teaching through motivation, communication, non-verbal aspects of communication and cross-cultural comparison. Thus, in literature teaching, these aspects could be greatly enhanced by using films as complementary materials. Unlike the book, the film could present the real life in the classroom lively. It provides opportunities for the students to see the people, the customs and the cultures of the target language community. Furthermore, “the non-verbal aspects such as gestures, expressions, posture, dress and surroundings are as eloquent as what we actually say” (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990). Only if the students see the non-verbal aspects of communication, could they know the functions of them in real communication.

However, the using of films in literature teaching does not mean merely play the film for the students in the classroom. Actually, the teacher need to design some activities based on the films and the novel, so as to create the environment in which the students could interact effectively with each other. Also, the students’ language proficiency and their specific needs should be taken into account. The paper will illustrate a sample activity which is designed according to the features of the films in the following.

Activity 1: Watching & role play

(1) Level: Intermediate and above;

(2) Objective: Understanding the importance of non-verbal communication (body language & facial expressions), discussion, speaking, motivation, collaborative learning;

(3) Rationale: (a) The non-verbal aspects are as eloquent as what we actually say” (Stempleski & Tomalin 1990); (b) Students could not acquire the knowledge about non-verbal communication through reading the novels;

(4) Materials: Any sequence with clear body language and facial expression;

(5) Materials length: Two sequences about 6 minutes;

(6) Activity time: 30 minutes.

Process:

(1) Tell the students that they will watch two sequences with no sound. Their first task is to understand the main idea;

(2) Play the first sequence with sound off;

(3) Students discuss the situation and characters in groups;

(4) Play the second sequence with sound off;

(5) Students discuss the situation and characters in groups;

- (6) Ask the students to list all the similarities and differences in the two sequences in terms of location, character, things happening, attitude, result, etc.;
- (7) Share the results in the class;
- (8) Divide the students into two groups. Each group will be given a role play task about one sequence;
- (9) Play both sequences with sound. Get the students to do brief note-taking about the conversations in the sequences. Give them the opportunity to recompose the plot on the basis of the original one;
- (10) Each group acts their play out.

3. Conclusion

From the discussion and the sample activity displayed above, it is reasonable to claim that the films could enhance the English language teaching in many aspects. Because of its very nature, the films could create lots of advantageous opportunities in the language class that the novels couldn't. It could record and represent all kinds of voices and actions in various authentic situations. Moreover, it is like a window on English-language culture. Therefore, the teachers should design appropriate activities based on different films according to the specific needs. Actually, there are diversified ways of using films that have great potentiality in facilitating English learning. The paper suggests that a further study is needed to explore how to use films in a deeper and wider scale in English classroom.

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