

How easy access to stories told cross-media can bring ethics and aesthetics into daily classroom life

(And why this matters in a social media-drenched world)

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What does easy access via new technology in classrooms mean for stories told about the social world “cross-media,” that is, stories that shift from one content platform –say a book—to another content platform –a screen adaptation? How can cross-media story telling promote students’ human potential across three foundational ways of knowing and valuing: academic, ethical, and aesthetic? Put more problematically, why are educators so wary of using movies in their work with students?



Part 1: The Opportunities Cross-Media Provide for Learning from Stories

As the world entered the 20th century, the age of mass media began in earnest. In the world of entertainment, it began as silent film, and by the 1920s, “talkies” would arrive. The newly innovated/ing motion-picture industry was eager to take well-known stories from the canonical library of literature and the humanities, and adapt them for, or translate them into, major motion pictures. Reaction to the origins of cross-media was mixed back then. It still is now.



To this day, even when critically acclaimed and commercially successful, these well-branded literary adaptations, with rare exceptionⁱ, have usually ended up skeptically, if not cynically, consigned by K-12 educators to the curricular back shelves, mainly for not stacking up to the books from which they were adapted. Put another way, unless a film adaptation is a literal rendition, most teachers will find it unacceptable.ⁱⁱ Even then, students are taught to judge the slightest variance

in a story when it moves from book to film, as sacrilege, even though kids will shrug and tell you it’s done simply to make the story more exciting. Without clear academic purpose, representations in film of meaningful humanistic stories drawn from great literature are still at risk for being seen

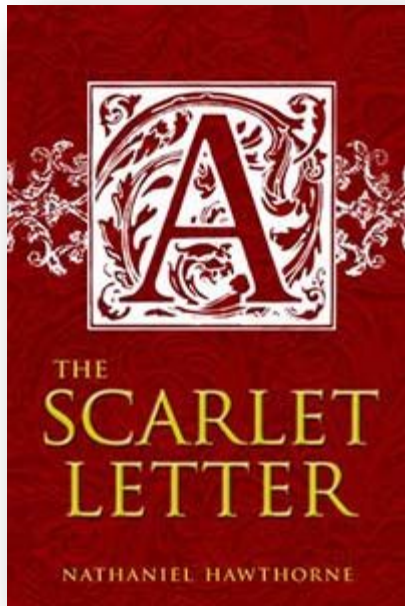
as something frivolous at best, or to be relegated to un-core, academic course-like film studies. Teachers seldom expect that their students will engage in anything more than ethically-gossipy, academically-sloppy, or aesthetically-wonky discussions (“Can you believe that hairdo/sweater/awesome car?”) about this and that.

Film viewing in formal K-12 education is still largely a reward for the hard work of learning how to deeply comprehend a printed text.ⁱⁱⁱ At least that is the commonly perceived “narrative” that has been sent out to the general public about the pitfalls of the entertainment industry from the educational sector of our society for more than 100 years.

Sometimes critical of the quality of the production, and often, as noted, loathsome of any changes in plot and character (e.g. “aging-up” a young protagonist), for many years educators have been understandably hesitant to use film adaptations of beloved stories first appearing as books as “full partners” in mainstream elementary, middle or high school language arts, social studies,



or history classes or curricula.^{iv} This stance tends to be dually-driven. On one hand, research evidence as to what core educational skills will be necessary for students’ future (both at work and in their higher education), leads to the fear that expenditure of time on film in classrooms will detract from students’ academic capacities: for close reading and academic language skills; for deep comprehension of print-text; for weighing text-based evidence; for making valid arguments: to understand the perspectives of the author and the story players, real or fictional; and, generally, to be well-informed about the (social) world.^v



In addition, middle- and high- school instructors of courses such as history and social studies are similarly hesitant about the validity of the content that films try to “teach.”

From this perspective, movies are often seen as simultaneously highly potent *and* highly suspect depictions of content knowledge. They are often filled with historical inaccuracy, anachronism, propaganda, or worse. Exacerbated by the aesthetic vitality of film narrative, today’s easy access to this form of media through new technology (and instant ability to recommend their preferences to their peers)

only increases fear that students will defect from their teachers' firm focus on inculcating disciplinary and print-based literacy skills.^{vi}



This academic-based reluctance to embrace film media is further fueled by a long-standing belief that, beyond mangled literary adaptations, motion pictures (even if not *too* aesthetically or academically flawed, even if great literature) run the risk of

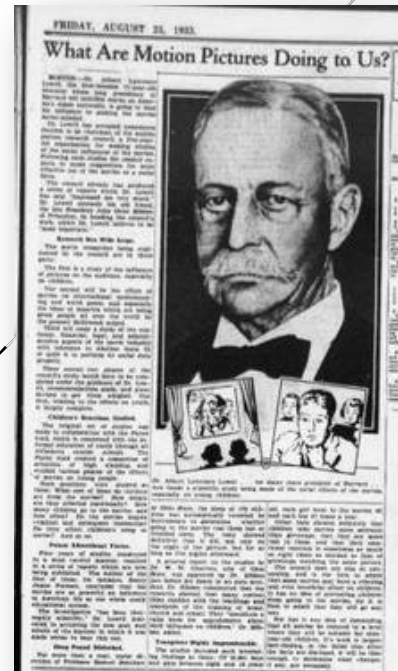
being even more *morally* corrupt than text when it comes to the impressions they make on young receivers of knowledge, in this case, viewers.

These concerns may sound to some old-fashioned. They are. This conventional wisdom about the corrupting dangers of film and film studios can be traced back to the *Payne Fund Studies*^{vii} of the late 1920s and early 1930s. With the dawning awareness of the extraordinary hold mass media could have on public opinion, largely in the form of unregulated “entertainment,” especially film, this series of sociological studies was a first attempt to use empirical (or social scientific) methods to determine the effects of movies on the behavior and morals of impressionable youth.

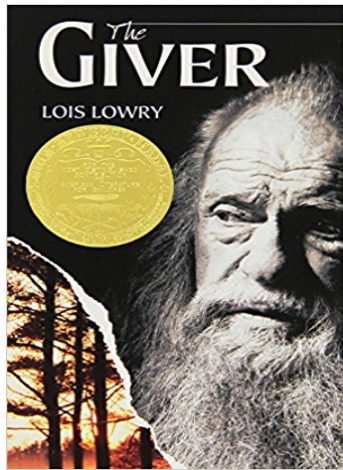
Although the studies have been widely criticized as flawed (if not bogus), lacking in rigor, and being politically motivated, they nonetheless were the first attempt to rigorously study the impact of various forms of film media on the moral development of youth, coming as they did out of a profound uneasiness for many parents, educators, and civic leaders about not only the “empty educational calories,” at best, of such a popular form of mass entertainment, but more significantly perhaps, their detrimental impact on character formation.



There is an alternative narrative to either the predicted coming extinction of print or the continued demonization of and rear-guard defense against the inevitable onslaught of film into language arts, a



humanities, and especially literacy classrooms. This reciprocal animosity between entertainment and education may soon be a thing of the past.^{viii}



Highly-respected children’s Newbery Award-winning author Lois Lowry (*The Giver*, 1994) has reframed the definition of a faithful film adaptation of a book, and by extension, offered a useful working definition of successful cross-media, saying “A faithful film adaptation is one that’s true to the spirit of the book.”



In the context of multiple media platforms for the delivery of content and the enormous box office successes with mass distribution of entertainment-oriented stories originally written for a youth audience, there now comes “good” cross-media: engaging and educational.

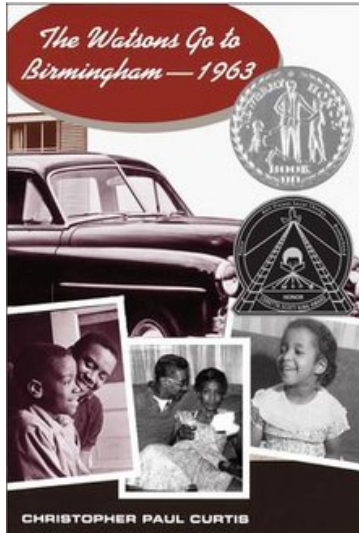
One recent example, R. J. Palacio’s novel about the challenges faced by a young boy with a cranio-facial abnormality. Widely read in November 2017 its film commercial and critical acclaim. schoolchildren traveling in having read the book in class.^{ix}



Palacio’s *Wonder*, published in 2012, is a by a young boy with a cranio-facial elementary grade language-arts classes, in adaptation was released to great It has been viewed by legions of yellow buses *en-masse* to movie theaters

Consider another story widely read in schools, but less often viewed, even a though full-length film adaptation has been made for television. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is a Newbery award-winning (1996) historical fiction young adult story written in 1995 by Christopher Paul Curtis.^x From the criteria of both lexile level and socio-historical content. “*Watsons*“ can be read by elementary grades as young as fourth grade.





The novel uses the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in September, 1963 as the backdrop for a family story about trauma, courage, and identity. The screen adaptation, written by Tonya Lewis Lee, foregrounds the Children’s March,^{xi} a mass-media protest and event (courtesy of documentary clips from national television news) which occurred the previous May in which thousands of Birmingham children and young people were arrested for marching downtown to protest segregated schools.



For the 2013 film, Lee inserts front-and-center, powerful, historic, archival documentary footage of the Children’s March, thrusting this little-known but historically significant event in the Civil Rights Movement right before the very eyes of viewers. It shows children as young as seven and as old as seventeen marched into police wagons, hauled off to jail in school buses, sitting on the floors of filthy county jails singing freedom songs, being doused by jets of water forcefully



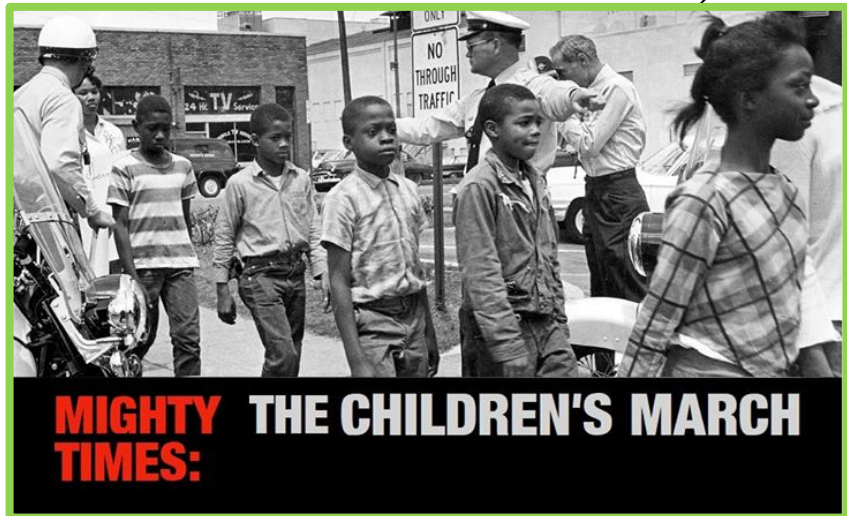
shooting from firehoses turned on them by firemen, and snarling police dogs unleashed on them by police.

Now a screen adaptation of a novel commonly read for and by elementary school-aged students contains material more frequently used with older students in civics or social studies classes. Woven seamlessly into the film version, this material hopes to demonstrate how civil rights

leaders used the power of non-violent (or peaceful) civil disobedience by the most vulnerable members of society--its students-- as a lever for the promotion of social justice. This underscores a tacit tenet of cross-media stories, one which carefully considers and elaborates Lois Lowry’s insight: a literal adaptation is not necessarily a faithful adaptation, nor is a faithful adaptation necessarily a literal one.

In the movie version, actors playing students share with each other why they believe their civic engagement is just. In general, the book and film tell similar stories with different emphases, differing information, and varying degrees of emotional impact. Both versions lend themselves to further exploration into background knowledge and ethical reflection. Each engages the aesthetic power of the story, told cross-media, to move readers of text and film by focusing on different educational (academic content and skills) and ethical issues.^{xii}

Practice-oriented research questions also abound. What lessons do youth say they take away from the story in print and film? How might students make the case for either seeing or reading the story? What happens to deep comprehension when the novel *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is read followed by a screening of *Mighty Times*, a 2004 Academy Award-winning documentary, followed by a screening of the film *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*? How can such differences in point of view (education), moral foreground and backdrop shifts (ethics), and analyses of the production values (aesthetics) be presented with students? What additional story opportunities would students craft on their own as a result of such cross-media study? In such empirical study there is enormous and exciting opportunity.



But this will take time to catch on. One way to move in this direction is with a distinct kind of professional development.

Part 2: The Professional Development Challenge for Educators

At the heart of the matter is this question: what kind of professional learning experiences might be most appreciated by educators? The answer is not simply business as usual. As a case-in-point, think here of the novel *Wonder*. Because the movie adaptation was hugely successful, many spinoffs were distributed across multiple markets, including the market for educational activities.

Sadly, one has only to go online to instantly find, for example, crossword puzzles available to teachers for use with students for vocabulary work, or “character traits” worksheets with the movie logo in the background. In other words, an insistence on *imposing “standard fare” educational content and pedagogy on a story told cross media is old wine on new platforms.*

Furthermore, haphazard comparing and contrasting a book with its film adaptation is not the compelling work of cross-media story telling. Why not? For one thing, while activities that are primarily educational and/or ethical might be apparent, such activities do not necessarily provide an understanding for teachers (or youth) of the educational importance of integrating aesthetic awareness *with* academic and ethical knowledge and skills for deeper learning.

We are suggesting instead leading with professional discussion groups (informally “clubs”) that begin with a focus on the aesthetic; encouraging the frank aesthetic comparison of the story itself among club members; analyzing through close readings, the aesthetic comparisons of how each media portrayal delivers the story; letting the fusion of aesthetic form and content of a story guide the resultant educational content and pedagogy, by teachers and with students. What might this look like? Leading with aesthetics can be as simple as contemplating the benefits of a book’s chapter lengths with the movie’s scene length, or as complex as moment-by-moment analyses of key scenes. For students, what gets cut, added, or changed is always interesting. How might leading with the aesthetic be best accomplished for ourselves as educators?

Here are two examples. First, it is reported that one reason text-resistant boys enjoy reading *Wonder* is that it has very short chapters, 1 to 3 or 4 pages long. (“I read four chapters. Yeah!”) ^{xiii} Both readers and viewers also like how the sections of the arc of the story (the clusters of short chapters) are presented from the perspective of major characters.

Second, in the film version, there is a moment when by accident Auggie overhears “new friend” Jack Will confiding to the other boys on Halloween that he isn’t really friends with Auggie. Jack Will even goes so far as to say, “If I looked like that I think I’d kill myself.” Jack Will and the others are completely unaware of the fact that the person standing in the doorway in costume and mask is Auggie. Because Auggie is motionless in the doorway, we conclude that Auggie is stunned by this, even though we do not see his face or hear his voice.

The scene is very minimal dialogue, simple music playing it. Yet the emotional intense, immediate extremely important subsequent telling of onscreen. How does work? How is it How do the cross-cut



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shots, shifts in point of view and music all work to communicate Auggie’s emotional response in this moment? In both cases, these are issues where an aesthetic way of knowing heightens the ethical awareness (Why do you think Jack Will said those things in that situation?) and academic knowledge and

skills. (What is peer pressure? Can you write a different ending to that scene other than Auggie simply walking away?)

Part 3. Conclusion:

We are not proposing a discussion group focusing on why the movie was/wasn't better than the film (or vice-versa) or the lesson plans teachers intend to create. Instead, this discussion group would begin its work acknowledging and then activating what C. S. Lewis called 'the surrender of ourselves' and our imagination to let the work(s), --or story, as told through a piece of art-- reach us:

"Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. There is no good asking first whether the work before you, deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out." xiv

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein believed that ethics and aesthetics were one in the same because at the core of both were questions of value, of selection, choice, the creation of priorities and their consequences. We think in practice they both overlap, Venn diagram-like, with educational goals, in particular, the academic goals in everyday classrooms.

With both "Watsons" and *Wonder* opportunities abound to consider differing ways that the aesthetic, educational and ethical have been selected and converge --and the consequences and value of such convergence. For example, with the film "Watsons," teachers can examine how the choice to include strong documentary footage in the movie (produced in the fiftieth anniversary year of both the Children's March and the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church) allows a greater focus on content/background knowledge about segregation and, *should the teacher want to take this on*, may inculcate a sense of moral outrage in the viewer in order to focus on a discussion of equity. The movie's focus on The Children's March raises front and center the ethical issues of civil disobedience as well as the struggles parents of these children had in making their own choice to allow their children be placed at risk, in danger, *should the educator, the school, want to take this on*. (Another set of reasons for the professional "story club.")

When focusing on the book, the teacher might want to address how his personally witnessing the aftermath of the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church effects Kenny's character development, and how he then understands evil in the world and what it takes to be courageous in its wake. The centrality in the movie of the Children's March shifts the focus to Byron's character as he develops a sense of civic purpose listening to his cousins' first-hand account of the March. Cross media helps bring these shifts into alignment.

Members of the cross-media discussion group will differ in their opinions and feelings, based in part on their external educational constraints, and in part on their own beliefs and life experiences. But the *Cross Media* framework combined with a balanced emphasis on different ways of knowing the story;



academically, ethically and aesthetically, will help each of them locate why they are agreeing and disagreeing in discussion, through their application of this pedagogical framework to their own analyses, beliefs and practices.

The students will gladly follow suit.

ⁱ Think Shakespeare's 1599 *Julius Caesar* script, the 1937 enactment on the stage with Orson Welles as Brutus at the Mercury Theater in London, and the 1953 movie distributed by MGM, with James Mason in the same role and Marlon Brando as Marc Antony). See also, Jenkins, H. (2010). Transmedia storytelling and entertainment: An annotated syllabus. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 24(6), 943–958.

ⁱⁱ By movie or film, we mean to include both the technology of the making of the story, and all the technologies of its delivery, i.e., television, streaming, dvd, digital, etc. A corollary to our argument here is that technology now allows stories made good across media to stay, in entertainment industry terms, "evergreen," i.e. a metaphor for "readily accessible," (and thus continually "profitable").

ⁱⁱⁱ Or, put more colloquially, in schools, viewing films about a story is the "entertaining" reward, the prize in the *Cracker Jack* box, for the "hard work" of reading, comprehending, and interpreting the story in print.

^{iv} Wegner, H. (1977). *Teaching with film*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation. Forty years ago, Wegner noted, "many teachers are alarmed by the incursions of film and television into their classrooms and often effectively resist the organized development of visual skills."

For a more contemporary view, see Rushkoff, D. (2006). *Screenagers: Lessons in Chaos From Digital Kids* (Hampton Press Communication). Hampton Press, Incorporated.

^v Draper, D (2010-2012) Comprehension Strategies. Visualizing & Visual Literacy. DECS Curriculum Consultant, Northern Adelaide (Page 3 – Draper points out that Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson, 2003, suggest using a Watch-Read-Watch-Read (W-RW-R) method in which students will build some background of the text, make predictions, watch part of the movie, read more of the text, confirm understandings, make more predictions, watch more of the movie, and continue reading the text.”

^{vi} Duhaylonsod, L., Snow, C., Selman, R.L., & Donovan, S. (2016) “Toward disciplinary literacy: Dilemmas and challenges in designing history curriculum to support middle school students.” *Harvard Education Review* 12/2015; 85(4):587-608. DOI:10.17763/0017-8055.85

^{vii} Garth S. Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie, Kathryn H. Fuller; (1996) *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy*. Cambridge Press. The Payne fund self-identified as an organization “interested in the radio, motion pictures and reading in relation to children and youth.” It commissioned over a dozen projects to undertake “scientific” studies related to the academic and moral development of children growing up in a media world.

^{viii} Dionne, C. (2017). They're making it into a movie: The trend of adapting teen novels to the big screen. *YA Hotline*, (104).

^{ix} But prior to its dvd or streaming release which can be easily recruited (up-loaded) directly into any classroom with a big screen.

^x *The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963* (1995) is a [historical-fiction](#) novel by [Christopher Paul Curtis](#). First published in 1995, it was reprinted in 1997. It tells the story of a loving African-American family living in the town of [Flint, Michigan](#), in 1963. When the oldest son (Byron) begins to get into trouble, the parents decide he should spend the summer and possibly the next school year with Grandma Sands in [Birmingham, Alabama](#). The entire family travels there together by car, and during their visit, tragic events take place. The movie was written by Tonya Lewis Lee and directed by Kenny Leon.

For a book/movie comparison see: <http://bookboxdaily.scholastic.com/2013/09/23/the-watsonsgo-to-birmingham-1963-book-vs-movie/>

For easy access to the film version: <http://www.hallmarkchannel.com/the-watsonsgo-to-birmingham>

For an example of the purposeful cross medial approach, see also, Selman, R.L. and Elizabeth, T. (2013) Literacy & Values: A Teacher's Resource for *Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963*, Zaner-Bloser (open source. <http://www.walden.com/tv-movie/the-watsonsgo-to-birmingham/>)

^{xi} *Mighty Times: The Children's March* is an Academy Award-winning (2004) [documentary film](#) about the [Birmingham](#), Alabama civil rights marches in the 1960s. It depicts young student

activists in who participated in the [Children's Crusade \(1963\)](#). En masse, these students were hosed and set upon by police dogs, arrested and jailed.

^{xii} In March of 2018 another student protest march occurred, this time concerning school safety and gun control. Historical stories, both fact and fiction, told cross-media, and focused on the intersection of cross-disciplinary perspectives, might provide an opportune moment for deep comprehension. Such cross-media story telling presentations would greatly benefit from careful empirical study as to the meaning youth make of them and of the sequence with which related cross-media stories are presented and utilized.

^{xiii} Reported by Jabari Sellars, lecture in H 370, HGSE, March, 2018

^{xiv} Pacatte, Rose, FSP, "Shaping Morals, Shifting Views: Have the Rating Systems Influenced How (Christian) America Sees Movies?" in Johnston, Robert K. Ed., *Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline*. Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, Chapter 13, page 319.

Here are two examples from *Wonder*. First, it is reported that one reason text-resistant boys enjoy reading *Wonder* is that it has very short chapters, 1 to 3 or 4 pages long. ("I read four chapters. Yeah!")^{xiv} Both readers and viewers also like how the sections of the arc of the story are presented from the perspective of major characters. This interpretation of "anecdotal" data is heavily aesthetic, but also academic. Second, in the film version, there is a moment when by accident Auggie overhears "new friend" Jack Will confiding to the other boys on Halloween that he isn't really friends with Auggie. Jack Will even goes so far as to say, "If I looked like that I think I'd kill myself." Jack Will and the others are completely unaware of the fact that the person standing in the doorway in costume and mask is Auggie. Because Auggie is motionless in the doorway, we conclude that Auggie is stunned by this, even though we do not see his face or hear his voice. This focus is highly aesthetic, but also heavily focused on an ethical, or more broadly social issue, of respect and (un)kindness. How this part of the story is revealed in print and on film could be very engaging to early adolescents.

The scene is very short, with minimal dialogue, with simple music playing underneath it. Yet the emotional impact is intense, immediate and extremely important to the subsequent telling of the story onscreen. How does the scene work? How is it "built?" How do the cross-cut shots, shifts in point of view and music all work to communicate Auggie's emotional response in this moment? In both cases, these are issues where an aesthetic way of knowing heightens the ethical awareness (Why do you think Jack Will said those things in that situation?) and academic

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