

Adaptation Studies and the Australian National Curriculum

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The Australian National Curriculum for students of schooling age (ages 5 to about 18) has been in a process of design and roll-out since its inception at the end of 2008 by the then Labor Government led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. The overhaul of Australia's national curriculum has been a long time in the planning and is the first major program that aims to bring a national curriculum across the six Australian states and two territories. Despite a recent proposed review of the process by the incumbent Coalition government's Education Minister, Christopher Pyne, who is hostile to the content of the curriculum, the National Curriculum is on course for roll-out for the next few years.

The National Curriculum is of interest for scholars and educators in the field of transcultural and adaptation studies because the word "adapt" features throughout the National Curriculum's framing papers and policy documents. Developments in the Australian National Curriculum are of particular interest to me because I am a member of the adaptation studies community, and am reminded also of how a topic that I run at Flinders University called *Adaptations: Literature on Screen*, taps into key proposals and concepts underlying so many of the discipline/subject areas within the National Curriculum. Key terms drawn from the National Curriculum's framing papers suggest that the notion of "adapting" learning, or looking at how different texts are "adapted" into different media all point to ways to ways that university topics like mine can better prepare future educators for innovative changes occurring in the school sector.

The mildly troubled beginnings experienced at my university by the topic *Adaptations: Literature on Screen* offer a taste of the problems that teaching areas such as adaptation, transmedia and transcultural studies still face in the Australian tertiary sector. *Adaptations: Literature on Screen* is a topic that was launched at Flinders University in 2006. Offered as an elective to second and third-year university students, this topic has

enjoyed some of the largest enrollments of any elective offered in the BA at Flinders. When the topic was introduced, however, it encountered early suspicion from both its home department of English (“students will only study *Adaptations* because they think they’ll have to do nothing but watch a few films”), and from colleagues in the Department of Screen and Media, who declined to cross-list the topic with the Screen major on the grounds that it would be “too literary in focus”.¹ The predicament of *Adaptations: Literature on Screen* seemed to echo the “lively debate[s] [of] the late 1970s” involving “what ‘doing’ English” — or Screen Studies, for that matter — “entails and where its boundaries lie” (Cartmell and Whelehan 18). What has become apparent since the topic’s inception at Flinders University, however, is that the largest number of students doing the topic are enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts (BA) and the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) — the very students who will be future teachers responsible for implementing the National Curriculum.

This article will consider how a topic such as *Adaptations: Literature on Screen*, despite its contested beginnings within one tertiary environment, is nonetheless well-placed to serve the needs of B.Ed/BA students, as well as meet the new challenges opened up by the new nation-wide overhaul of the school sector in Australia. The developments in the English and History streams of the senior secondary section of the National Curriculum, in particular, invite contributions from the fields of adaptation and/or transmedial studies. The popularity of areas such as English and History, along with tertiary students’ embracing of a hybrid topic such as *Adaptations: Literature on Screen*, suggests that it may be time to examine more closely how these topics might more fruitfully overlap in future. Given the emphasis in the Australian National Curriculum on the combining of traditional literary genres with “multimodal texts such as film” (*The National Curriculum Board* 2009), the study of adaptations generally seems well poised to create a clearer dialogue between secondary and tertiary curriculum in Australia.

A definition of adaptation studies, as it is formulated by the authors of the *Adapt Project* in Australia, is simply the analysis of a text and its adaptation; more complexly, the *Adapt Project* team also suggest that an inclusive definition of adaptation studies is one which

1 Unattributed comments from colleagues at Flinders University.

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raise[s] some questions about how adaptation studies might be framed both in disciplines and beyond them as an area of scholarly enquiry which reflects on contemporary fascination with adapting, appropriating, retelling and re-functioning, particularly in the transformation from one narrative platform to another. (Wilson, Whelehan and Sadler, 11)

With this definition in mind, I will argue that adaptation and/or transmedial studies promote the “de-siloi-sation,” or the dissolution of the boundaries that separate traditional Arts disciplines such as English, History, and Screen and Media in the tertiary sector.

Adaptations; Literature on Screen came into being in 2006 as evidence of the natural progression of where English-based topics had been evolving throughout the 1990s and early 2000s; it embraces the shift — relatively late in world terms, admittedly — towards a cultural studies approach to the consideration of texts from the perspective of their commodity value. Such an approach to the analysis of texts may well have remained a talking point within the academy, but government peak educational bodies had already made steps to implement hybrid approaches to knowledge found in adaptation studies by embedding hybrid adaptation practices into all levels of the National Curriculum. Given the Australian secondary school sector’s driving of the national conversation about curriculum, it seems timely to re-assess — or re-assert — how adaptation and/or transmedial studies lend themselves to a 21st-century approach to tertiary sector learning. Adaptation studies, by its very nature, facilitates new cross-platform and cross-media curricula and encourages understanding that texts, in whatever form, are interpreted and take on meaning from multiple sites.

To illustrate how adaptation studies can be used in the tertiary and secondary classroom as a learning tool that embraces the opportunities for cross-fertilization between traditional discipline boundaries, I will use Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *The Remains of the Day* and Merchant-Ivory’s Anglo-American financed 1993 adaptation of the same name as an exemplar.

The Australian National Curriculum

The Australian National Curriculum marks the first attempt in Australian educational history to create a nationwide primary and secondary school curriculum. After its inception from 2008, it commenced its roll-out process in 2011 with the aim of implementing the Foundation to Year 10 studies program, and later the Senior Secondary (Years 11 and 12) program by 2014. Phase one of the program has introduced English, mathematics, science and history; phase two will consist of geography, the arts and languages; and phase three will introduce information and communication technologies, economics, business and civics and citizenship, health and physical education, and design and technology. Suffice to say, the National Curriculum has attracted much debate, much criticism, and much support. As with the recent overhaul of the British National Curriculum, the Australian National Curriculum has polarized groups on all sides of the political divide.

It is perhaps the History curriculum that has attracted most attention in the latest round of political squabbles about the process in Australia. As Donald MacLeod has said of the design of history curricula generally, in Australia, the United States and elsewhere: “history is a territory fought over by competing and conflicting ideologically motivated groups” (16). The English curriculum for Australian schools has attracted similar murmurings to the History stream, and yet the competing voices and agendas in the Curriculum afford those of us in adaptation and/or transmedial studies an interesting avenue for research. The open-endedness of many of the Curriculum’s descriptions, and its implicit acknowledgement throughout that knowledge groups necessarily overlap and engage in dialogic exchanges creates a space for the methodologies used in adaptation and/or transmedial studies.

A key example of this overlap appears in the wording of the Australian National Curriculum’s “National English Curriculum Framing Paper” (2008-9) where it is suggested that

For a long time subject English was largely about the reading and writing of printed texts. In recent decades there has been attention to the ways in which English language combines with visual information in both print and digital

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settings. [...] This expansion also acknowledges the importance of “arts-enriched” activities (accompanying English learning with drama, visual images, music, and so on) in language, literature and literacy activities. These activities enhance engagement of students in English learning throughout the school years and contribute a distinctive set of skills to the program. (6)

In Unit 3 of the Senior Secondary English curriculum, one of the guidelines stipulates that students will be encouraged to “create, transform and adapt oral, written and multimodal texts in a range of mediums and styles”, and learn to identify “how meaning changes when texts are transformed into a different genre or medium.” For example, students will:

Investigate and evaluate the relationships between texts and contexts by [...] [evaluating] how texts convey perspectives through: the selection of mode, medium, genre and type of text; the ways points of view and values are represented; the selection of language features that generate empathy or controversy, for example, juxtaposition of image and text. (“National English Curriculum Framing Paper”)

In the Literature stream (Senior Secondary) students are invited to create imaginative texts and integrate “real and imagined experiences” by selecting and adapting particular aspects of texts to create new texts; using analysis of literary texts to inform imaginative response; transforming texts studied in one medium or genre to another for different audiences and purposes”; and, “reflecting on the significance and effects of variations to texts” (“National English Curriculum Framing Paper”). The repeated appearance of the word “adapt” in the National Curriculum suggests there is ample room here for the methodologies we employ in adaptation studies to be employed as a teaching and learning strategy in the secondary classroom, methodologies that move even the adaptation debates away from what James Naremore calls the “Great-Novels-Into-Great-Films” model that privileges

the changes that occur in form, and towards a platform whereby the shifts between texts can be considered in light of the “economic, cultural, and political issues” (10) that arise when texts are studied together.

In addition to the trends in the English and English Literature streams in the National Curriculum, the History stream recognizes the indelible links and overlap that exists between disciplines. The following is from one of the National Curriculum’s framing papers on the History stream:

Strong connections exist between English and history, and literacy is deeply embedded in historical understanding. Through the study of history students learn how to find information, how to read texts with critical discernment and how to create their own texts that present the results of historical understanding clearly and logically. These skills should be developed across a range of textual genres and formats, including art, photography, film, music, fiction and multimedia. With a growing range of multimodal texts in the areas of film and ICT, students should also develop the capacity to use such texts to undertake and present research that demonstrates historical understanding. (“Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History”)

A key general capability and cross-curriculum priority of the Year 10 History unit on World War II, for example, is to teach students to “Develop an historical argument using information from a range of sources,” including film and literature. And later, in the Senior Secondary Unit 3 (‘Modern Nations in the 20th Century’) students are encouraged to

Analyse, interpret and synthesise evidence from different types of sources to develop and sustain a historical argument; Evaluate the reliability, usefulness and contestable nature of sources to develop informed judgements that support a historical argument; Analyse and account for the different perspectives of individuals and groups

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in the past; Evaluate critically different historical interpretations of the past, how they evolved, and how they are shaped by the historian's perspective; Evaluate contested views about the past to understand the provisional nature of historical knowledge and to arrive at reasoned and supported conclusions. ("Modern Nations")

How, then, might an adaptation studies' methodology carve out a space in the Foundation — Year 10 and Senior Secondary curricula, and, in turn, how might the National Curriculum be co-opted into debates about the positioning and relevance of a topic like *Adaptations: Literature on Screen* in the tertiary curriculum at an institution like mine that is focused on training future educators?

In refreshing our memories about some of the most cogent discussions about the future directions of adaptations from the past ten years, we can find a manifesto already in place to enable adaptations to meet the challenges of the Australian New Curriculum (and similar programs in the United Kingdom). In 2000 James Naremore called upon the adaptations community to “move from the margins to the center of contemporary media studies” (15), and to re-invigorate the study of adaptations by moving “away from issues of ‘form’ and focus more on the economic, cultural, and political issues that pertain to adaptations” (10). Robert Stam makes a similar plea when he suggests that: “Adaptations [...] can take an active stance toward their source novels, inserting them into a much broader intertextual dialogism” (64). Film adaptations of novels, he argues, perform transformations

according to the protocols of a distinct medium absorbing and layering the genres and intertexts available through the grids of ambient discoveries and ideologies, and as mediated by a series of filters: studio style, ideological fashions, political constraints, auteurist predilections, charismatic stars, economic advantage or disadvantage, and evolving technology. (68-9)

Just such a call to action is echoed in the National Curriculum's framework for upper-level English studies when it is stipulated that

students should learn to identify “how meaning changes when texts are transformed into [...] different genre(s) or medium(s)” (*National English Curriculum Framing Paper*). Likewise Thomas Leitch thinks we should stop using E. D. Hirsch’s “post-Arnoldian program for literacy” wherein “adaptations have value only to the extent that they allow access to the world of the great originals that establish their credentials” (9) and instead look to ways to use adaptation studies to demonstrate the ways “texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten” while exposing students to the notion “that to experience a text in all its power requires each reader to rewrite it” (12-13).

With these manifestos in mind, how then might a text like Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* — which, I admit openly, falls into the category of what James Naremore would call a “usual Anglo-American literary suspect” (10) — provide a learning tool wherein students can learn to integrate “real and imagined experiences by selecting and adapting particular aspects of texts to create new texts; [use] analysis of literary texts to inform imaginative response; [transform] texts studied in one medium or genre to another for different audiences and purposes” (“Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History”)?

***The Remains of the Day*: a Case Study**

Early responses to the adaptation of *The Remains of the Day* tended to focus on the failure of Merchant-Ivory’s production to capture, among other things, Ishiguro’s complex use of irony. Held up as one of the worst offenders in the heritage film category for promoting nostalgia for a reconstructed English past, Merchant-Ivory’s adaptation of Ishiguro’s novel was condemned, like other heritage productions, for its “focus on *things* rather than events” (Dolan, Gordon and Tincknell, 176). It has been accused of delighting “in an anti-narrative pictorialism” (Voigts-Virchow, 15) or worse — a “stagey pictorialism [...] [that] [...] detracts from, rather than enhances, a complex sense of the past” (Dolan, Gordon and Tincknell, 176). For many critics of the Merchant-Ivory production, it is this film’s very stylishness that is its main shortcoming. Criticism leveled at this film is best summed up by Geoffrey Macnab’s response:

On the page, perhaps, Darlington Hall may seem a vast mausoleum of a house which keeps servants and toffs alike manacled by propriety.

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On screen, however, the sheer visual relish with which the place is depicted can't help but undermine the mordant irony in Ruth Praver Jhabvala's script. (160)

Alan A. Stone in the *Boston Review* went further, comparing Merchant-Ivory's brand of heritage to the methods and tropes used by hypocritical antagonists of pornography:

British directors have given nostalgic Englishmen and their Anglophilic American cousins frontal shots of wealth and aristocratic privilege displayed in all their luxury and opulence along with a message about moral decay and decadence. The team of Ivory/Jhabvala specializes in such period piece films and no matter how intriguing Jhabvala's plot line is, Ivory's images of wealth and splendor are what really endure. Ivory knows how to feed an appetite for nostalgia among American Anglophiles and *The Remains of the Day* is a banquet. (Stone)

A number of writers, however, have rebutted such claims about the heritage film's distillation of historical verisimilitude, narrative irony and textual "fidelity." Cartmell, Hunter and Whelehan have pointed out that many productions labelled "heritage" or "history films" "come[...] to us by way of previous texts and culturally bounded aesthetic categories" and "self-consciously interpret history through the meshes of genre and fictional precedent." (Cartmell, Hunter, and Whelehan, 2) Julianne Pidduck summarizes the complexities involved in accusing a film genre of creating an "artificial" sense of history when she asserts that "cinema can never offer an unmediated window onto the past, and historical fiction and costume drama alike depict the past through the stylistic, critical and generic vocabularies of present cultural production" (14). Pidduck continues:

The challenge facing the critic is to distinguish between nostalgic celebration and self-conscious critique of empire or the ascendancy of aristocratic or bourgeois values [...] Costume drama's paradoxical doubled address aligns with

the microcosm's concentric frames of perception and allegory. The contemporary viewer is at once inside and outside these mannered microcosms of the past, and the resulting play of surfaces and depth, witty remove and deep feeling provide some of the genre's greatest pleasures. (14)

As these varied responses to the Merchant-Ivory adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel suggest, the field of adaptation studies has been beset, even predicated on, the problematics of textual hierarchy and division. The collegial responses that met the launch of my adaptations topic, *Adaptations: Literature on Screen*, were by no means mildly hostile voices in the wilderness — indeed, it would be unfair to suggest that they were even hostile; rather, what my colleagues' concerns reflected was the long-standing distrust between advocates of the primacy of the printed word and protectors of the hard-won tertiary space of screen studies. More particularly, despite an acknowledgement from colleagues in the areas of History, Screen and English that transmedial forms of learning are acceptable — indeed desirable — in contemporary curricula, what remains is a distrust, perhaps, of who “owns” the various domains within this multi-modal spectrum. Leaving the ideological objections of my colleagues to one side, it might be that the jostling for space within the liberal arts in Australia that leads to the continued silo-isation of disciplines is driven by a top-down model that sees disciplines funded according to the number of student enrollments that topics attract. This economics-driven jostling for the hearts and minds of a slowly diminishing tertiary student pool in the BA might well be that which underpins ideological and pedagogical objections to adaptation studies.

The Australian National Curriculum, regardless, promotes the diminution of textual hierarchies. It has built into its very structure the potential for de-siloisation of traditional disciplinary boundaries, while recognizing at the same time that different disciplines have discrete, core practices of their own. The National Curriculum promotes the idea that “texts” are not owned by one area or another. History can and should teach film, literature and art; English requires a deep and clear acknowledgement that all fictional and non-fictional texts are the products of historical moments. Screen studies topics must continue to realize the various intertexts, paratexts and production determinants that go towards

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the creation of screen products. It would, of course, be untrue to suggest that this is not already happening in universities the world over; the comparatively recent experience of my topic, however, suggests that this is an area of debate that is nonetheless ongoing.

In order to outline how the use of “texts” in a cross-disciplinary context can serve to promote the collapse of textual hierarchies, I should like to consider further the case of Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*; for it is at the intersection of debates about history/historiography, historical and national representations in literature and film, and cultural value generally, that the role of adaptation studies can be most useful as a teaching tool. The historian James M. Lang has already identified the usefulness of *The Remains of the Day* in the history classroom for the ways the butler Stevens’ (Anthony Hopkins’) highly subjective and contrived narrative identifies and explores “the causes and effect of the gap between public and private memories, and [...] the consequences of that gap for our understanding of history and of this novel” (52). Lang argues that this gap between public and private memories in Ishiguro’s text is the source of unease for readers, an unease that

derives from Ishiguro’s thorough interrogation and critique of a common historiographic practice which literary theorist Michael André Bernstein [...] has labeled *backshadowing*. Historical backshadowing criticizes historical actors for not having the prescience to foresee the future which has become the historian’s present or more recent past. Put most succinctly by Bernstein, “Backshadowing is a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they too should have known what was to come.*” In the case of *Remains*, backshadowing would critique Stevens and Darlington for not foreseeing the Holocaust [...], and for facilitating dialogues with Nazis. (Bernstein, qtd. in Lang, 152)

Anthony F. Lang Jr. and James M. Lang later argue in the context of teaching International Relations students at American college level that Ishiguro's novel introduces students to the idea that "political actions, even international political actions, result from a variety of sources, not from any single and clearly identifiable theory" (210). They suggest that there are inherent dangers in subscribing to "The discourse of turning points" and the "practice of backshadowing" because such approaches "encourage [...] us to see history as a static field, one which we observe, rather than construct" (154-5). The rejection, therefore, of "backshadowing and the discourse of turning points partakes of the larger currents in postwar conceptions of history by placing a greater emphasis upon contingency and upon the might-have-been" (Lang 155).

James M. Lang's identification of the unease readers experience at the "conflict in historical perspective" in Ishiguro's narrative can equally apply to the unease experienced by some viewers when (what is still sometimes called) the "source text" (Ishiguro's novel) is transformed into what is perceived to be its derivative counterpart (Merchant-Ivory's film). The "unease" that has dogged debates about historiography in the history community, and debates about fidelity within the adaptations and/or transmedial communities should be (as Lang says in relation to Ishiguro's novel): "a source [...] of power" (155). Rather than merely identify how the formalistic details that differ between the two texts create this unease, the adaptation and/or transmedial studies practitioner should focus instead on how the interplay between narratives, genres, and mediums creates a dialogue which might speak to students' own interpretations and understanding of the interplay between texts. Whereas Lang suggests that Ishiguro's novel "transcribes a dialogue between the grand narratives of the war and the minor, subjective narrative of Stevens — between the macronarratives of public history and the micronarratives of private memory" (155-156), I would assert that it is equally as challenging to observe how the interplay of meanings and interpretations exposed by the shift from page to screen offers readers and viewers a new dialogue between the macronarratives about the adaptation process and the micronarratives of viewers' and readers' own interpretations.

The field of adaptations offers numerous possibilities to teach students to reconstruct rather than passively observe texts. A film adaptation such

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as *The Remains of the Day* is not a mere attempt to “recapture” the static object that is the book; rather, it engages in aspects of history- and *story*-making to illustrate the gaps present in any text waiting to be re-imagined by new readings and representations. Leitch profiles one college course that attempts to apply this method of re-imagining texts by encouraging its students to rewrite sections of novels as screenplays, and to choose which parts of the book that they think should be profiled. This, says Leitch, encourages students “to become active producers of the text” (18) and exposes them to the “incessant process of rewriting as critical reading” (16), and of critical reading as a creative process. Teachers “unwilling to reconfigure their literature courses as screenwriting courses” might instead, Leitch suggests, encourage

their students to think of adaptation [...] not in terms of what it faithfully reproduces — what it selects, emphasizes, and transforms — but of what it leaves out. Instead of acting as if the power of the story lay in what is explicitly portrayed, we might further explore the “gaps” [that the reader perceives [...] because “whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins” (18).

A book such as Ishiguro’s, one that taps into contemporary debates about history and literature’s relationship with history, along with an adaptation that has kept the adaptation and heritage community much exercised over points of representation, provides the space in which the students can feel compelled to “complete the stories they think they are merely consuming” (Leitch, 19). As Leitch puts it:

adaptation study does not approach adaptations as either transcription of canonical classics or attempts to create new classics but rather as illustrations of the incessant process of rewriting as critical reading [...] this approach to adaptation study treats both adaptations and their originals as heteroglot texts rather than as canonical works, emphasizing the fact that every text offers itself as an invitation to be rewritten.
(16)

Dennis Cutchins, Laurence Raw, and James M. Welsh add to this debate about the pedagogy of adaptations by noting that “adaptation is above all a creative process and not simply a slavish imitation or reproduction of an original.” (Frontispiece) Literary theorist John J. Su identifies how Ishiguro’s novel profiles the way the act of storytelling “opens up the conversation” (in this particular case, about what constitutes national identity) and frees “it from the provenance of ‘experts’” (568). In like manner, educationalist Louise Phillips calls on Australian educators to open up the conversation between disciplinary boundaries by promoting ways that students might be encouraged to be storytellers as part of their learning; teachers in the primary and secondary sectors, she suggests, might explore “how curricula content can be opened and inquired through story” (Phillips). By examining the gaps that appear in the storytelling process, from page to screen, from reader to viewer, from genre to genre, mode to mode, discipline to discipline, the study of the process of adaptation generally can assist students in the secondary and tertiary classroom to observe how narratives are constructed within different discourses, and how discourses are mutually dependent. Adaptation and/or transmedial studies, in general, promote a flattened hierarchy of texts and curriculum areas.

Similarly, we should scrutinize the Australian National Curriculum for ways that it opens up opportunities to scaffold students’ creative learning and storytelling skills. This has the potential to help the conversation move away from reductive notions of deficit and loss in terms of textual transformation, as well as debates surrounding where topics such as my English Studies elective should be placed within the academy. Importantly, too, a cross-disciplinary conversation about how adaptations might function in the National Curriculum classroom saves adaptations from falling into the trap of merely being “consumed under the sign of literature” (or History, or Media Studies) (Leitch 9) and offers instead a space in which students can creatively process narratives of knowledge across the disciplines. Teachers in the secondary and tertiary sectors will be delighted and “amazed at how much students enjoy “topics that embrace, analyse and explore texts as adaptations”; they will warm to “how flexible it is in the classroom” and can be used as the authors of the *Adapt Project* suggest, “to promote critical judgments via creative practices and other innovative forms of assessment” (Wilson, Whelehan and Sadler 11). I am quietly hopeful that topics such as *Adaptations: Literature on Screen*

will continue to rejoice in its hybridity, and that the National Curriculum in Australia will continue on its steady course and adapt to, rather than buckle under, the war of words about textual and knowledge hierarchy that it continues to attract.

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