A STUDYGUIDE BY BRIAN MCFARLANE

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A novel that has spawned over twenty film and television adaptations, starting in the mid-teens of the last century, obviously speaks eloquently to filmmakers and audiences alike. Cary Fukunaga’s new version in many ways evokes Charlotte Brontë’s groundbreaking novel as potently as any of its predecessors, and, in the case of its ‘Jane’, Brontë herself would surely have been pleased. However, in order to assess how successfully the film works, it may be useful to consider what sort of material the novel, first published in 1847, set in motion.
‘I’: Who is telling this story?

The last chapter begins, ‘Reader, I married him’ and this evocative and oft-quoted sentence has several important implications for how we respond to the novel. It carries with it the suggestion, the promise, of a gratifying closure, of the kind of happy ending most favoured by novelists in days before looser arrangements were acceptable for relationships. But this is to advert merely to the most superficial, and obvious, resonance set up by the sentence. Far more significantly, it explicitly announces that someone is ‘telling’ this story: it is in fact the climactic moment of direct address by the narrating Jane Eyre to the ‘reader’ who has been frequently the subject of her confidence in the course of the novel. She is writing with the benefit of hindsight in accounting for how she reacted to this or that event or personage, but at the same time Brontë wants, as surely any novelist does, to have us read as if we are absorbed in an unfolding narrative whose outcome is known to the first-person narrator but not to us. The narrating Jane insists that ‘this is not to be a regular autobiography, and she (and her author) rather cunningly side-step this issue when she writes: ‘I am only bound to invoke memory where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest; therefore I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence: a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connexion’ (p.85). That is, the narrator’s function is to make us feel we are receiving a sort of history, not a fiction. In a moment, we shall see how film responds to this literary balancing act, of absorbing us in a fiction while making us feel it is a ‘true account’.

The voice behind ‘I’

It may be hard to imagine now how remarkable Charlotte Brontë’s novel was when it first appeared. Her first novel, The Professor, had been rejected by several publishers, but she was ‘cata-pulted into literary celebrity with the publication of Jane Eyre, one of the best-sellers of 1847... [which] brought her an extraordinary degree of autonomy’. I quote this because, like Jane Eyre herself, her author had felt the pinch of constraint, not only financial but in yearning for a life of ‘action’ of a kind not normally available to women of the period. So, there is an element of daringness in this story which must have spoken to large numbers of women hedged about by conventional expectations. She has created a heroine of remarkable independence of mind, though that independence is maintained at considerable cost to her.
She is only able to say ‘Reader, I married him’ after he has been brought low by fortune, when there can be some sense of equality between them. The orphaned, friendless governess has by the end inherited enough to enable her to live independently (and to give three-quarters of it away to those who have helped her) while the object of her love has become blind and his family mansion has been burnt down. Behind plain-looking and plain-speaking Jane Eyre’s narrating ‘I’ is the author who knows and understands more than Jane does, impressive though Jane’s perceptions and intelligence are. It is Brontë who enables us to perceive the wit in this exchange between Jane and the pious hypocrite, the Rev. Brocklehurst:

‘Do you know where the wicked go after death?’

‘They go to hell,’ was my ready and orthodox answer.

‘And what is hell? Can you tell me that?’

‘A pit full of fire.’

‘And should you like to fall into that pit, and be burning there for ever?’

‘No sir.’

‘What must you do to avoid it?’

I deliberated a moment: my answer, when it did come, was objectionable: ‘I must keep in good health, and not die.’ (p. 34)

That is surely intended by Brontë, if not by the youthful Jane, to amuse us. I’ve quoted it just to suggest through a simple example the difference between the narrating ‘I’ and the creating intelligence behind it.

**Feminism and Jane Eyre**

Perhaps no other of the great 19th-century novels so potently evokes the constraints on women’s lives or adopts so rigorously feminist an approach to its protagonist. That is a broad and maybe unjustified statement, but considering, say, Jane Austen’s heroines, who have their own problems certainly, or even George Eliot’s Dorothea in Middlemarch or Gwendolen in Daniel Deronda, these women lead lives of cushioned ease by comparison with Jane Eyre. I am not widely read in feminist literary criticism but am aware of the regard in which Jane Eyre is held, and it is not just a simplistic championing of the oppressed that informs such writing but a serious consideration of the conflicting forces at work in Jane Eyre’s story. One of the most important of such accounts of the novel, Adrienne Rich’s, has this to say about its significance for her: ‘I have never lost the sense that it contains, through and beyond the force of its creator’s imagination, some nourishment I needed then [as a girl and a younger woman] and still need today... Jane Eyre has for us now a special force and survival value.’

**ACTIVITY**

Consider the importance of the first-person narrator in forming our responses to Jane Eyre’s fortunes: how these responses might have differed if ‘She’ had replaced ‘I’ throughout; and what sort of challenge the novel’s narrational mode offers to filmmakers. How does the new film deal with this? How does it make us privy to Jane’s perceptions and feelings?
This is no place to embark on an extended feminist critique of the novel, even if I were competent to do so, but the book is clearly central to writing about the constrictions and repressions relating to women’s representation in 19th-century English literature. There is in fact a major critical work named *The Madwoman in the Attic*[^1], whose title draws directly on the plight of mad Bertha Mason, Rochester’s wife, the revelation of whose existence constitutes the novel’s major narrative turning-point. Jane may be the prototypical feminist heroine, determined to make her own way and to preserve her integrity in the process, but Bertha, the madwoman in the attic, resonates with the passionate underside of the feminine, kept hidden because of its unseemliness, of its dangerous potential. A 2011 film will almost certainly be read differently from an 1847 novel in this respect, but it is part of the intertextual baggage that accompanies an insightful study of the new film.

[^1]: *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Susan Gordon (1981)

**ACTIVITY**

Consider how far you’d describe Cary Fukunaga’s film as ‘feminist’ in its orientation, and what kind of relevance such issues still have today.

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**Narrative blocks**

The over-all narrative trajectory of *Jane Eyre* can be seen as a series of journeys. The physical journeys are responsible for transporting Jane from one challenging situation to another. Seen as a whole, they may be seen to constitute another sort of journey – one towards selfhood and maturity, towards a fuller understanding of self and others as a result of negotiating some perilous paths and tormenting conflicts. I don’t want to discuss the novel’s ‘plot’ (though the word sounds more contrived than the novel for the most part feels like) in detail, but just to draw attention to its main movements which are governed by Jane’s physical movement from place to place.

She is first seen in the Gateshead home of her unloving aunt, Mrs Reed, where she is unwanted, disbelieved, physically and emotionally bullied. The pathos of an orphan’s situation is established here. With the exception of the intermittent kindly action of the servant Bessie, she is presented as – and feels herself to be – alone and friendless, her parents having died in her infancy and her Aunt Reed only too anxious to be rid of her. She is sent from here to Lowood School, where her ‘wicked’ reputation (the work of Mrs Reed and the Rev. Brocklehurst) precedes her and where she is subject to more harsh treatment. However, with a growing sense of her own worth and of the injustice to which she has been subjected, and with the friendship of the (idealised?) headmistress Miss Temple and the older girl Helen Burns, she survives and stays at Lowood to become a teacher. When Miss Temple leaves to marry, Jane realises that ‘My world for some years had been in Lowood... now I remembered that the world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had the courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils’ (p. 86). It is this sort of self-awareness that impels her move to Thornfield, where she has applied for a position as governess to Adèle, the ward of Thornfield’s owner, Mr Rochester.

This large central section of the book makes us privy to Jane’s development as a young woman of character. It comes naturally to her to deal straightforwardly with people and situations, to act with decorum and common-sense, to have an accurate sense of her own place in the Thornfield establishment – and, in particular, in her dealings with Rochester. She wins his esteem, and indeed his love, by being entirely and transparently herself.

When it is revealed that he has deceived her in his attempt to marry her, she chooses the morally right course and leaves Thornfield and its comforts for the uncertainties of the long road that finally brings her to Marsh End, where the Rivers family takes her in when she collapses from exhaustion, hunger and exposure at their door.
Recuperating under the kindly care of the Rivers sisters and finding work in a local school for poor children, she leaves when their brother St John wants her to accompany him as his wife to the missionary fields of India. But this last journey, which takes her back to Thornfield and thence to Fern-dean, is also impelled by her ‘hearing’ Rochester’s voice calling to her.

Images

On the superficial level, the images of place most obviously account for the novel’s structural progress. Think of what stages in Jane’s growth are accounted for by her time at Gateshead, then Lowood, Thornfield, Marsh End and Fern-dean, and film, with its resources of location shooting (Derbyshire, in this case), production design and lighting, can differentiate significantly among these. As well, it is worth noting the persistence of female influences in Jane’s life: the ‘good mothers’ represented by Bessie, Miss Temple and Helen, the kindly Mrs Fairfax at Thornfield, the Rivers sisters at Marsh End. Against these, however, are the far from benign images of ‘bad mothers’ incarnated in the likes of Mrs Reed or vindictive Miss Scatchard at Lowood or the snobbish Lady Ingram. Masculine images, less profuse, still offer some striking contrasts: think of Rochester, the Byronic hero, and the austere, chilly St John Rivers, or on a lesser level the awful Brocklehurst and the humane Dr. Lloyd. Images are at the heart of a film’s meaning, so that it will be instructive to reflect on how far Cary Fukanaga’s film has decided to take on such contrasts – and, if it has not, how this affects our response to the story.

Inevitably such images will bring with them a resonance beyond the merely personal, and the details of a novel’s prose or of the way a film looks and sounds will draw our attention to large issues such as class and wealth, to gender relations and ideological matters such as the effects of religion and education. There is no way in which either novel or film can suppress such ‘information’, however sub- or un-consciously its meanings are achieved.
Adaptation and narrative

The most striking departure that Fukunaga’s film makes from the novel’s narrative trajectory is in starting two-thirds of the way through Jane’s history – we’ll return to this – but at present it is interesting to see how much of a 450-page novel can be preserved in a two-hour film, just supposing this was the filmmaker’s intention. Actually, those large narrative blocks I outlined briefly above do essentially find their way into the film, though not necessarily in the same order. There is a major difference in the film between the story’s chronological time and its plot’s ordering of this. There is still a progression from the loveless confinement of Mrs Reed’s (Sally Hawkins) Gateshead home to the forbidding portals of Lowood School from which Jane (Mia Wasikowska) will eventually make her way to Thornfield following her advertisement for a position as governess. She will leave here under the same circumstances and make her torturous way to Marsh End, whence, in possession of a small inheritance and in certainty that Rochester has called her, she returns to Thornfield.

And that is where she stops: this is the only serious divergence from the novel’s chronological pattern, and it may be worth considering why the director and the screenwriter, Moira Buffini, have elected not to send Jane on to the novel’s final location at Ferndean.

Within the repeated pattern of four main narrative locations, much of the series of events that occurs in each is retained, albeit sometimes in shortened form. In the large central section of the novel’s interest, that set in Thornfield, most of the crucial events are retained: that is, what Roland Barthes characterised as ‘cardinal functions’⁵, by which he meant those events which act as hinge-points of narrative because they are capable of different outcomes. If such an event were omitted, the course of the narrative would run differently. For example, if Jane had never come to Thornfield, obviously we should have had a very different story; or if she had not been welcomed by Mrs Fairfax (Judi Dench); or if she had not startled Rochester’s horse; or if Rochester (Michael Fassbender) had married Blanche Ingram (Imogen Poots); or if he had not kept his mad wife in the attic. And so on. It would be tedious to go through the entire section in this way, and I have only selected the most important of such cardinal functions, but it is useful to consider what kind of adaptation the filmmakers had in mind. There is, in my view, no special credit in what is called a ‘faithful adaptation’, but it can be revealing to see how closely the film has mirrored the novel’s chief events because diversions and omissions can sometimes give an insight into what the filmmaker’s ‘take’ on the novel is and what it reveals of his intentions.

ACTIVITY

Look closely at a particular episode of the novel (e.g., the early sequence at Gateshead, the Reeds’ home); decide what its cardinal functions are; consider whether the film has chosen to reproduce these, and, if it has not, what are the effects of any such changes on the film as a whole.
Adaptation and narration

How is the familiar story being ‘told’ in the new film? It is one thing to retain most of the main events of the original novel, but a film’s individuality, and its cinema-specificity, will be essentially located in its strategies of narration, the means by which the story is put before us. The first and perhaps most obvious break with the novel’s presentation happens at the outset of the new film.

1 Structural shift

Fukunaga’s film begins with the opening of a door and a young woman walks purposely out and stumbles across fields, arrives at a crossroads viewed from above, stumbles on through increasingly rugged terrain, falls in tears on a rocky outcrop, staggers towards a distant house-light and collapses on its doorstep, where she is discovered by a man, who proves to be St John Rivers (Jamie Bell). We cannot escape asking ourselves why the film is starting like this, rather than making its way linearly, as the novel does, to this critical moment about two-thirds of the way through. The title of the film is announced on a plain black screen with solemn music on the soundtrack, and this gives way to the image I have noted. Possibly irrelevantly, this image of a door opening on the outside world and a figure emerging always evokes, for me at least, John Ford’s magnificent western, The Searchers (1956). Perhaps it is not so irrelevant, but part of screen’s enduring iconography: that is to say, such an image suggests a potentially dangerous world out there into which a questing protagonist must make her way. The overhead shot of Jane at the crossroads in a vast, empty landscape is the film’s way of ‘telling’ us that she is lost, that she must choose without their being anything actually to nudge her choice, and the ensuing shots of her struggling through the rigours of terrain and weather create our sense of a young woman at her wits’ end.

The filmmakers have clearly elected to present a protagonist with a grievous ‘back-story’, which the rest of the film will unfold in its own way, as well as exciting our expectations about what possible future might lie in store for her. So, shifting the starting-point of the novel’s plot (and I use ‘plot’ to indicate how the events of the ‘story’ have been [re-]arranged) is more than just a matter of changing the order of events: that has certainly happened but the film’s apparatus of actor, cinematography, mise-en-scène (what is there in the frame at any moment) and editing all contribute to the effect of change from the original, all contribute to the setting up of hypotheses in the viewer which the film will go on to provide answers for.

2 Flashbacks and inserts

No sooner does the film bring its Jane to the doorstep of her rescuers (who, by a very Victorian coincidence, prove to be almost her only living relatives⁶) than it cuts strikingly to a flashback episode from her childhood. The young Jane (the eloquent-faced Amelia Clarkson) is created here as the victim of the bullying meanness of her cousin John Reed (Craig Roberts) when he finds her harmlessly reading The Book of British Birds. She in turn attacks John, establishing at once that this film will have a strong heroine, one who will not submit unresistingly to violent ill-treatment. That she will be a protagonist to be reckoned with is further borne out when she speaks her mind passionately to her malevolent Aunt Reed. How then, if we did not know the novel in advance, did such firm-minded independence end up wet, starving and weary on the Rivers’ doorstep?

This self-contained flashback draws to a close when Jane leaves the Reeds’ home to be sent to Lowood School, on a morning of such mist and gloom as bodes little good for her chances there, and ends with her arrival at the school. The next substantial section of the film works on a series of alternations – between the Rivers’ house and Lowood, and we shall expect some connection of meaning to be
developed in this movement between the two settings. It would perhaps be more apt to say that Jane is now established at Marsh End and that what ensues there motivates the inserts. Here is a brief summary to suggest how this is achieved:

i) At the Rivers’ table, there is talk of Jane’s education and she is asked: ‘What did it prepare you for?’

ii) The insert following the cut shows Jane at Lowood, being hit and humiliated, made to stand on a stool as a punishment and the other girls warned to deny her their love.

iii) In the Rivers’ home, Jane is sketching and wins praises for her drawing of St. John.

iv) At Lowood, the dying Helen Burns tells Jane, ‘You have a passion for living’, and this is reinforced in the close-up of Jane cradling the head of the dying Helen.

v) St John Rivers tells Jane he has found work for her in a parish school for poor girls. Despite the bleakness and humble nature of the situation, Jane is glad to accept, saying: ‘It will suit me very well.’

vi) In the final insert of this alternation we see Jane as a teacher at Lowood, and then being farewelled there to take her next journey – to Thornfield.

This alternation between two settings is a narrational mode that clearly comes more easily to film than to the novel where such rapid shifts of setting might be merely confusing. Here, it is more than just a matter of moving between locations: whereas what is happening at Marsh End may motivate Jane’s recollection of her time at Lowood, what happened at Lowood helps to account for her situation and behaviour in the Rivers’ little world.

3 What becomes of the ‘first-person’ narrator?

Sometimes films make use of a voice-over to accompany the action: this was common in private-eye fictions of the film noir kind in the post-World War Two period; it is employed to an unusually pervasive extent in Martin Scorsese’s superb 1993 adaptation of Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence; and very recently a ghostly soundtrack voice guides us through the mini-series version of Cloudstreet (Matthew Saville, 2011). Cary Fukunaga has chosen to dispense with this most explicit, if intermittent, cinematic equivalent of the novel’s narrational voice, but there are other ways open to the filmmaker of ensuring that the ‘first person’ is not diminished. Most obviously, the film’s Jane is in virtually every episode of the film, as victim or as participant in an active sense or as observer. During the long central section of the film, while Jane is installed as governess to the child Adele (Romy Settbon Moore) at Thornfield she at first may seem dwarfed by the magnitude and style of the house which she will later leave in an expression of her own strength of mind.

It is in this central set of sequences that the sorts of statements we would
have associated with the novel’s narrating heroine are made. ‘I wish a woman could have action in her life, like a man’, she says to Mrs Fairfax, whose only response to Jane’s speaking about the limitations of her life is to recommend ‘fresh air and exercise’. When Jane takes this banal advice, she comes up against her fate by causing the returning Rochester’s horse to rear up and throw its master. Back at Thornfield in the scene between Jane and Rochester, he asks patronisingly: ‘What is your tale of woe? All governesses have a tale of woe’. Jane, not about to be put in her place even by her employer, ‘in a terrible mood’ as Mrs Fairfax has warned, claims to have no such tale. In their next scene together, he tells her, ‘Your gaze is very direct Miss Eyre. Do you think me handsome?’, to which she replies: ‘No sir’. And a little later there is this exchange, begun by Jane’s saying:

‘I fear the conversation has got out of my depth.’

‘You’re afraid of me.’

‘I’m not afraid of you. I’ve simply no wish to talk nonsense.’

In such exchanges, the woman whose strong sense of self and of what she considers right is rendered to a large extent in the novel’s first-person perspective is here enacted in the firmness of her manner of speaking – and in the body language of the actress which also communicates a quiet assurance and a respect for her own integrity.

We may miss that thudding sentence from the novel, ‘Reader, I married him’, but there is ample compensation in the ways in which the film’s Jane is kept absolutely at the centre of our attention. Film ‘narration’ incorporates so much more diversified practice than we understand by ‘first-’ or ‘third-person’ narrating in a novel. However, it is worth wondering whether Fukunaga’s strategy of starting the film with Jane two-thirds of the way through her experiences in some ways corresponds to the novel’s first-person narrator who ‘knows’ everything that has happened prior to her telling her story. By the time we meet the film’s Jane, she also ‘knows’ a great deal about those experiences.

4 Other matters of narration

Strategies specific to the cinema, or at least unavailable to the novel, are called into play in doing the work of narration in a film. For instance, I mean matters such as cinematography (lighting, colour, framing, distance from camera, length of shot), editing, production and costume design, and, as influential as any in governing how we respond to a film, actors’ performance. Let us consider briefly how some of these strategies are deployed in Fukunaga’s film.

i) What the camera is up to

Where the camera is placed, how long it holds a shot, from whose point of view it is directing our attention: these are some of the ways in which it performs a narrational function. Consider the use of close-ups and point-of-view
shots in the episode of Jane’s second meeting with Rochester after his return to Thornfield. The camera cuts between his confronting, almost bantering style of address and her natural stillness. The use of alternating close-ups reinforces our sense of what is going on between Rochester and Jane insofar as their words have revealed this. At the end of this key episode, referred to above, Jane’s awakened sexuality in relation to Rochester is hinted at by the way she pauses as she mounts the stairs to inspect the painting of a nude reclining woman. It’s almost as though the idea of nakedness and its connotations with sexuality have struck her for the first time. The use of close-ups – especially those of Mia Wasikowska’s calm, unsmiling Jane – tells us about Jane’s reactions in ways that the novel’s first-person narrating prose might have made us privy to in her thinking.

The film also makes some striking use of long shots, ‘long’ referring to distance, not to time (a long take’ is a shot held for a longer-than-average time), and these serve very different narrational purposes from the close-ups. There are imposing overhead shots that suggest the chilly grandeur of Thornfield, just as in the opening sequence already discussed the high aerial shot created Jane’s – and our – sense of how emotionally (and geographically) lost she was on leaving Thornfield in such an unhappy state. Or on another occasion, as she wanders disconsolately in the frosty grounds of Thornfield on learning that Rochester has gone away again, the long shot is the film’s way of ‘telling’ us about her state of mind, now complicated by her growing feeling for Rochester. Another use of long shots is found in the brief montage that signifies the preparation of Thornfield to receive its house-party guests, with a shaking of curtains, taking up of carpets and so on. Such a montage sequence consists of a series of brief shots which add up to a single narrative or thematic meaning: here the shots are simply edited together to convey the idea of ‘preparations’ with their hint of foreboding about a possible change in narrative direction.

As well as matters of shot-length and distance, the cinematography makes another important contribution to meaning in its exercise of a very limited colour palette. This seems a film largely devoid of bright colour until it erupts in the blaze of the midnight fire at Thornfield, the work of Rochester’s mad wife Bertha (Valentina Cervi). Jane Eyre is for the most part a story of subdued passion and a central constrained life, so that the muted use of Technicolor becomes another way of reinforcing this. At film’s end, there is some romanticising in the interests of the visual when Jane returns to Thornfield now in charred ruin. The blackened remains of the mansion against the sky intensify our sense of what Rochester has lost and, in consequence, of how the scales have now tipped towards a greater sense of equality between him and Jane. When she approaches Rochester as he sits in the grounds of his ruined estate (not in the comparative comfort of Ferndean as in the novel), there is a new light and a new greenness of leaf in the air, as if quietly to hint at a more tranquil future for them together.

ii) What costume and production design can tell us

In that early scene in which Jane tells Mrs Reed how much she dislikes her, the dialogue is creating a potentially passionate heroine but the costume design is also telling us things about Jane’s situation. Whereas she is dressed in the plainest garb, indicating her dependent and loveless position in the household, Aunt Reed is swathed in the most extravagant display of silks and furs, a costume reeking of expense and of vanity. A not dissimilar contrast is later made between the elaborately dressed Blanche Ingram, who has her eye on Rochester, and Jane’s demure governess-gown, a
contrast that the film asks us to note on a couple of occasions. Or the casually raffish dressing of Rochester with the comparative austerity of St John Rivers’ habitual dress. These are simple contrasts that make their point through costume as well as through other aspects of the actors involved.

Similarly, production design works to distinguish among the vulgar lavishness of the Reed home, the bleakness of Lowood, the muted opulence of Thornfield and the domestic comfort that the Rivers daughters have established at Marsh End. It is worth looking more closely at how these contrasts are established in details of setting within the over-all production design which creates our sense of these locations, in conjunction of course with the cinematography.

ACTIVITY
Study carefully the episode of Jane’s second discussion with Rochester after his return, following the exterior scene in which she has been playing shuttlecock with Adele. Mrs Fairfax has removed Adele, and Jane and Rochester are sitting talking. Analyse the way camera angle and kinds of shot work in tandem with dialogue, matters of production design and editing to create the sense of relationship between them, the meaning of the sequence and its importance in the film as a whole.

iii) The actors as agents of narration

Of all the elements in a film’s narrating arsenal, including those discussed immediately above, possibly none is more potent with audiences than the performances of actors. Film ‘stars’ inevitably come to us in a new film trailing echoes of their previous roles, but even in a film such as this, whose main actors are not yet in the class of easily recognisable stars, actors will set up resonances for some audience members. Mia Wasikowska, just over twenty when the film was made, has already made a mark in The Kids Are All Right (2010, Lisa Cholodenko) and as the eponymous Alice in Wonderland (2010, Tim Burton), so that we come to the new film with some expectations about what she will make of Jane Eyre. Her unaffected plainness of speech is matched by an appearance that eschews all conventional glamour and glossing: she is playing a humble governess of some firmness of character, and her facial appearance (hair pulled back, no evidence of makeup or of jewellery, no extremes of expression) and her body language (dignified without pretension, quietly composed without any fidgetiness of gesture) contribute to the coherence of her performance while leaving scope for some transformation. It is in many ways an almost perfect incarnation of the Jane Eyre that Charlotte Brontë imagined for her novel. If you are familiar with earlier Janes, such as Joan Fontaine’s in the 1943 film version or Susannah York’s in the 1970 telemovie (shown in some cinemas) or Charlotte Gainsbourg’s in the 1996 film, you may be interested to compare Wasikowska’s interpretation. In some ways, it seems to me she captures more convincingly than any the plain-looking, plain-speaking Jane that makes her a serious match for the dominant Rochester. My point is that how an actor embodies the character in physical terms is a key element in film narration; that is, in guiding our reading of the film’s action.

ACTIVITY
Discuss the acting performances of other key actors in the film, particularly those of Michael Fassbender as Rochester, Jamie Bell as St John, Judi Dench as Mrs Fairfax and Sally Hawkins as Aunt Reed. Consider such matters as how they are characteristically framed in shots, their body language and facial expression and their manner of speaking. If you know the novel, you may be interested in how such performances correspond – or not – to how you imagined them on the page.
Intertextuality

We rarely if ever come to a film with no previous influences at work on how we receive the production before us. Intertextuality, as the word implies, refers to other ‘texts’ and how they may bear upon our response, in this case to Fukunaga’s version of Jane Eyre. These influences will of course vary from person to person, but there are at least four texts – or sets of texts – worth considering in relation to the new film. I want to do little more here than refer to these.

i) The novel

The most obvious is the antecedent novel. Those familiar with Charlotte Brontë’s novel will inevitably have preconceptions about the characters and events which make up its narrative power. In the matter of adaptation, it is arguable that the precursor text should be considered as no more than a major intertextual element the influence of which on individual viewers will vary according to how well they know and/or value the novel.

ii) Other filmed versions

This guide begins by referring to twenty-odd film and television adaptations of the novel. Again, the influence of these on how we respond to the new film will clearly vary in relation to how many of – or how well – these are known. In my own case, it is some time since I saw the 1943 and 1970 versions, but in both cases the Jane seemed to me more in the mode of film-star leading lady than the serious, watchful, entirely unglamourised Jane that the new film puts before us. And in each of those films, Rochester was played by a famously charismatic actor – Orson Welles and George C. Scott respectively, each with a body of imposing work behind him – whereas Michael Fassbender is comparatively new to films without perhaps having established a recognisable screen persona. Does this mean we are therefore more likely to respond to the way the actor inhabits the role, comparatively free from resonances of past performances in the role? It is not just a matter of actors, though – the 1943 film, for instance, dispenses with the large section of the novel devoted to Jane’s dealings with the Rivers family, and the fact that Fukunaga’s film takes these seriously, indeed opens the film with Jane arriving at their home, indicates a different approach. Films are made in a particular industrial and social climate and several adaptations of the same novel will almost certainly reflect this difference in their time of production.

iii) Two other books

The allusion above to The Madwoman in the Attic can stand in for the wide-ranging feminist writing about Jane Eyre. This book, and others such as Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing or Adrienne Rich’s essay mentioned earlier, or Pauline Nestor’s monograph, Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, will be a crucial influence on their readers as they come to terms with Fukunaga’s film. As well, Jean Rhys’s famous novel, Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), offers a postcolonial reading of the nineteenth-century novel, this time focusing on Bertha Mason, the first Mrs Rochester, situating her as the victim of a patriarchal society.
As I say, no one coming to the film will be devoid of echoes of other works. Everyone’s intertextuality is different, but the sorts of related “texts” I’ve referred to will bear on some viewers’ response to the film – and yet other viewers may find their reading of the film made richer or more complex by following up such references to works with which they are not familiar. Ultimately, any film must stand on its own merits as an autonomous work: in my view Cary Fukunaga’s film does so, but I can’t pretend that I could banish all those other books and films from my mind as I watched it, or that their echoes didn’t affect my response to this latest go at one of the great classics of English literature.

(Endnotes)

1. All quotations are from the Penguin edition, 1953, reprinted 1960, p. 444. Other page references to this edition are given in brackets as they occur.
6. Cf. how in Dickens’s Oliver Twist, as a presumed thief, fetches up at the home of his grandfather!
7. The ‘Dr Rivers’ listed in the film’s cast, played by John Sutton, has no connection with Charlotte Brontë’s Marsh End family.