Title of Paper: **Adapting with the Senses - Wuthering Heights as a Perceptual Experience**

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Abstract:

This essay examines the adaptation of Emily Brontë’s novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by film director Andrea Arnold (*Wuthering Heights*, 2011). My main goal is to characterize the film style of this adaptation within the frame of a tendency in contemporary cinema in which the haptic and phenomenal appeal of human bodies and the landscape provide a new configuration of the materiality of the story world through the senses and experiential immersion of film spectators.

Keywords:

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The most believably rendered character in Emily Brontë's only novel is the Yorkshire highlands, the largely inhospitable and sparsely settled region in which the central love rectangle festers. The story concerns exchanges of power and bodily fluids, the ultimate agents of sociopolitical alchemy [...]. Brontë's prose is lively and descriptive, but, curiously, not often sensual when describing the environment of her story. [...] Dispensing with much of the novel's "tell-don't-show" [...], Arnold teases out the harsh, tactile beauty of the narrative's brutal environmental philosophy. [...] Arnold pares down everything in the name of corporeal directness, most of all plot [...]” (Joseph Jon Lanthier)

Introduction

This essay examines the adaptation of Emily Brontë’s novel Wuthering Heights (1847) by film director Andrea Arnold (Wuthering Heights, 2011). My main goal is to characterize the film style of this adaptation within the frame of a tendency in contemporary cinema in which the haptic and phenomenal appeal of human bodies and the landscape provide a new configuration of the materiality of the story world through the senses and experiential immersion of film spectators.

Although the source novel has been adapted to film numerous times, Arnold takes a new cinematic approach by exploring the experiential qualities of film viewership. Compared with previous adaptations of Wuthering Heights, the experiential qualities of Arnold’s film represent a paradigm change; that is, from a more conventional approach, which I term observational description, to a more experiential approach, which I term sensory description. This paradigm shift is achieved through stylistic elements that are characterized by close views of the characters’ bodies and an intense haptic appeal that replaces the novel’s original dialogues and narrator’s voice for the direct perceptual experience of the characters and the story world.

This form of sensory description has two different impacts; namely, it gives a new dimension to the perceptual construction of space, which I term the re-materialization of the diegetic space, and it redefines the spectator’s experiential engagement with the characters through the senses. By integrating these two levels of embodiment – the senses and the experiential qualities of film – I invite a discussion of film adaptations based on an emergent line of filmmaking that evokes sensory memories and direct visceral responses from spectators.

Emily Brontë’s novel Wuthering Heights is a renowned Victorian novel and one of the literary works most frequently adapted to the screen (Elliott, chapter 5). From television, theatrical versions, and international film adaptations in several languages to the classic Hollywood version, this novel has been adapted in almost every decade since the 1920s (see Shachar for a complete list). What then distinguishes Arnold’s version from the previous versions, and what makes this adaptation relevant to current studies of film adaptation?
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In the tradition of the previous cinematic adaptations of Wuthering Heights, Arnold’s version keeps the sequence of events in the storyline intact but makes significant cuts to parts of the book (including most of the romantic relationship between Catherine Linton and Linton Heathcliff as adults and the first three chapters of the novel) and removes several narrators. Her approach is perhaps a more radical and freestyle approach to the source book. However, previous cinematic adaptations also rely on many narrative changes, and one can still identify the core of Wuthering Heights in Arnold’s film. I believe the nature of the cinematic style in Arnold’s film and its paradigm shift are more significant than the reassembly of the narrative puzzle. Arnold’s film adaptation seeks to not only tell a story with the specificity of an audiovisual medium but also create a radically different way for spectators to experience the story and to engage with the characters and with the materiality of the diegetic world.

This sensory approach to film adaptation implies a different quality of film viewership because it invokes all our senses rather than just sight. This approach has yet another consequence: it changes the focus from the traditional screenwriting motto of show, don’t tell to the motto of present to the senses, don’t just show the eyes. This means that the events, the characters, and the diegetic space are not merely presented visually and auditorily to spectators but create a simulation and a sensation of experiential immersion.

This does not change the serendipitous nature of the medium; that is, by participation, I do not mean participation in the narrative decisions but rather experiential participation on the level of characters and events that require not only our logical understanding of their motivations and goals but also our embodied and sensory understanding. Spectators continue to experience the diegetic flow that the director chooses to present and do not choose the direction of the story. However, spectators are potentially not merely distant observers but need to use sensory modalities other than sight and hearing to engage in and understand the experiential logic of the film.

One of the main devices responsible for this, which I will later describe in greater detail, is “turning the lights off” and presenting a very dark film with minimal light; this represents an invitation to close our eyes and to open our other perceptual senses. Another device is the use of sound design as a door to the tactile perception of textures and materials. Although the film style, lighting and sound are at the core of this paradigm of cinematic perceptual experience, these elements do not work alone, but rather in synergy with the phenomenology of the characters’ bodies and the textures of the materials and elements of nature, such as the wind and the water of the Yorkshire Moors.

One of the main ideas that I find useful in introducing this line of thought is the distinction between two different natures of description: observational description and sensory description. I draw a non-categorical distinction between these two concepts of descriptions based on nuances in this specific film adaptation, and I do not exclude the possibility that this distinction will develop in other directions if given further study.
Descriptions in novels are always somewhat more observational than descriptions in film. Either a narrator observes and describes events, one character observes another, or a character describes a certain experience in the first person. In all of these cases, descriptions in literature tend to be more observational than they are in film because even in a first-hand experience, description is always filtered through words. Film can describe events and characters’ experiences in a more direct way; that is, witnessing without words. Traditionally, however, film also relies on many observational tools, such as the use of narrators, dialogue, and even inter-titles, in contrast to Arnold’s film, which makes minimal use of these observational devices and not only describes by directly witnessing events and characters but also witnesses through a great deal of non-verbal communication and multisensory cues.

Sensory description thus relies on showing direct perceptual experiences across the senses; such experiences can be on the level of the characters (i.e., the perceptual experience of a character) or take place through a direct interaction of the camera with the material story world. Although verbal language can evoke multisensory imagery, sensory description and the multisensory presence of multisensory events through sight and hearing have more direct sensory connections with the evocation of multisensory imagery. Language can trigger multisensory imagery, whereas sensory description by an audiovisual medium can more directly trigger a perceptual experience across the senses, including senses in addition to the classic five senses, such as proprioception, the vestibular sense, nociception, and thermoception.

Adding to the different natures of language and the senses, an important element of distinction is the indirect experience of an observer versus the direct experience of a character. In this context, I use a broad definition of a narrator because I consider Catherine’s voice from her journal to be the voice of a narrator, as her voice narrates facts in the past tense and implies references to the other characters in the third person. Similarly, I understand Mr. Lockwood to be a character in a situation, for example, when he is in Catherine’s room and finds her journal. From there, he functions as a narrator by providing access to Catherine’s journal. The categories of narrator and character are not always rigid; in this context, Mr. Lockwood is a character in the story while simultaneously functioning as a narrator. These categories are not as ambiguous and complex in the film as they are in the novel because we see only characters and their direct experiences.

Finally, a third point of distinction is the evaluation of the proximal relationship between description and the character that describes an experience. This can be difficult to evaluate at times; however, it is often clear that the description is directly related to the character himself or that the character observes an event or character that has no direct sensory impact on himself. In other words, the character can describe the effects of being directly exposed to a certain sensory experience or the effects of observing that sensory experience on another character. For instance, “I discovered my candle-wick reclining on one of the antique volumes, and perfuming the place with an odour of roasted calf-skin. I snuffed it off, and, very ill at ease under the influence of cold and lingering nausea, sat up and spread open the injured tome on my knee. It was a Testament, in lean type, and smelling dreadfully musty […]”
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(Bronte: 30) is a case of sensory description in the novel, whereas “Heathcliff stood near the entrance, in his shirt and trousers; with a candle dripping over his fingers, and his face as white as the wall behind him. The first creak of the oak startled him like an electric shock: the light leaped from his hold to a distance of some feet, and his agitation was so extreme, that he could hardly pick it up” (40) is an observational description.

In the first description, there is a direct experience of the sensory elements of scent, temperature, nausea, and pain; thus, this description could be considered an experiential description that is evoked by verbal language. The second description is, however, a somewhat accurate portrait of an observer (Mr. Lockwood in his dream) as delimited by the visible effects of the character’s experience and the awareness of the observer. This description gives us some access to the materiality of the space and the body of the character (although second-hand access) and can be considered an observational description. The book alternates between these two modes of description, whereas the film commits to a strict sensory description in which characters do not express the qualities of their perceptual experiences through words; instead, the camera directly witnesses and delivers them to us, the spectators.

This systematic use of sensory description in a multisensory fashion, i.e., using the first-hand perceptual experience of the characters, makes Arnold’s adaptation a remarkable work. In her style of filming, the camera penetrates the intimacy of the characters and films their perceptual experiences as if through first-hand experience; I term this the process of adapting with the senses. Arnold does not merely observe the materiality of the diegetic world but constructs it through a direct simulation of the characters’ experiences; consequently, she creates the conditions for spectatorial engagement with the story through the senses.

Moreover, this comment is not just stylistic: Arnold also connects aesthetics and perception with a strong cultural impact. By debuting the black actors James Howson and Solomon Glave as Heathcliff, Arnold places us in direct contact with their skin and touch and guides spectators through an empathic relationship with the character that removes all color barriers. She dims the lights, showing the beauty and sensitivity of that haptic learning of the story’s world through the hands of the two black actors; later, she turns the lights on again in the later parts of the film to give shape and color to the beauty of the image. Arnold links three different levels of sensory description: the perceptual level of the haptic, the aesthetics that derive from this level, and a large dose of contemporary cultural sensibility.

Another possible advantage of this sensory description is that the film gains a more universal language that can appeal to spectators who are not physically acquainted with the landscape and the material reality of the hills and farmland of the Yorkshire countryside; in Arnold’s film, this countryside changes from being the background where the story takes place to being one of the objects of the story. Of course, this does not mean that a reader could not form her own mental imagery of the landscape through the novel; however, such mental imagery is certainly different from Arnold’s sensory description, which is also directly guided by the specific way in which the characters experience that world. Let us examine some scenes in the film to illuminate these concepts further.
The two levels of sensory description: the re-materialization of space and the perceptual experience of the characters

Arnold’s experiential aesthetics result in the re-materialization of the diegetic space and the mode of engagement with the story and the characters through the senses. These two levels are not separated; on the contrary, space is nearly always defined through the subjective experience of the characters, significantly through their hands as they scan that space and its textures. Hands guide the characters’ learning of the diegetic world, they shape the forming of their memories and mediate their relationships.

Arnold replaced narration and observation with sensory description, which is central to a line of cinematic adaptation in which the events of the story are just as important as the textures, touch, a thermoceptive sense of heat and cold, a pervasive sense of wetness, and physical pain. In line with this cinematic approach, the diegetic space and the perceptual experiences of the characters are not only shown by the camera but also filtered subjectively through the way in which the characters perceive the space and the diegetic world.

In my analysis of the film, I have identified what I term perceptual segments; three main perceptual segments occur in this film. The first segment extends from the beginning of the film (and the arrival of Heathcliff at the farm) to the moment when Catherine meets Edgar Linton. The second segment extends from the previous segment to the moment when Catherine decides to marry Edgar, which triggers Heathcliff’s decision to leave the farm. The third segment goes from Heathcliff’s return to the farm as an adult to the end of the film, coinciding with Catherine’s death.

In the first segment, the characters demonstrate a rich and intense sensory and perceptual exploration of the material story world. In the second segment, that sensory exploration is interrupted, matching the interruption in the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine. The third segment alternates between rich sensory exploration in which Heathcliff relives the romance through his sensory memory and a more conventional narrative progression of events. Because the first segment offers the most relevant material, I will briefly review a few scenes from this segment and describe how space and the subjective experience of characters are achieved through perceptual experience.

The opening scene introduces Heathcliff and the farm. Instead of presenting the farm in a more conventional way by using an establishing shot containing a full view of the farm from the outside and then gradually cutting to smaller-scale shots leading to close-ups of the characters faces, the scene begins inside a room in the farmhouse with a close-up of Heathcliff bleeding from self-inflicted wounds.

The interior of the house is confined, representing pain and traumatic memories even before we are made aware of the vastness of the surroundings of the farm. In an established pattern of spatial construction, this space is presented by layers of texture and materials: the wooden floor that creaks, the dust floating in the air, the sound of Heathcliff’s clothes, and the wounds in his skin. Throughout the film, space
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has a density and a weight that are achieved by using a lighting design that makes the dust in the air, the rain, and the humidity visible to the camera.

Continuing this segment, the following scenes introduce us to the landscape and to the space outside and show Heathcliff as he was when he first joined the Earnshaws’ farm. A large portion of this part is recorded in near-total darkness. Despite the darkness, which obscures a detailed perception of the scene, there is a strong sense of motion and spatial awareness. The darkness shifts our attention to the sound of someone walking and the sound of their feet and clothing touching the grass. This differs from the more conventional photographic approach to showing landscape. Instead of showing landscape in its photographic grandiosity, we experience it through our senses by closing our eyes and experiencing the sensory and haptic qualities of the textures and the characters’ breathing.

This is not just a stylistic effect; it changes our cinematic experience from full visual views to a more experiential level at which our film experience is guided by the characters’ walking and their haptic interactions with the environment. This represents a paradigm change from show, don’t tell to present to the senses. The fact that a large portion of the film is shot in near-darkness also highlights that the space is not merely audiovisually represented but is also constructed using multisensory mental imagery (Lacey et al., 2013) such that the characters mediate our spectatorial experience of the material world of the story.

In a way, this multisensory appeal of Arnold’s film uses some of the multisensory appeal of Brontë’s book and expands it by making it more central to the development of the story and the characters. Most importantly, this multisensory appeal is achieved more consistently through direct sensory description, whereas in Brontë’s novel, it is achieved by alternating various narrative voices. This is central to the distinction I make between observational and sensory description.

The outside space also helps to create the sense of imprisonment on the inside; a sense of heaviness is created by covering the sky with dark clouds and by the presence of a constant storm or threat that places a landscape “ceiling” above the characters. Moreover, the sky is not distant but is part of the reachable landscape and is in direct haptic contact with the characters. The sky makes the surrounding environment wet, imparting a visceral sensation of wetness and immersion. The characters enter and leave the farm in permanent darkness and storm, transporting the landscape to the inside of the house.

Space is constructed through sensory elements: the water, the textures, the temperature of the fireplace, the light from a candle, and the smell of the characters’ clothing. All visceral elements are not merely presented to our sight but are simulated perceptions that can be touched and felt through direct contact with the skin. As spectators, we have access to these experiential qualities and to the sensuous appeal of the space and the diegetic world through the mediation of the characters and, most importantly, through the sound design, which elicits much of the multisensory mental imagery that transports us to that world, which appears real and within reach in Arnold’s film.

To add another point regarding description, water is a sensory element that can be described verbally (in the book) or audiovisually (in the film); however, when
The experiential qualities of Arnold’s Wuthering Heights reveal the subjective experiences of the characters to the viewers in a direct fashion. It is not only the acting, however, that makes this possible. Arnold’s style of filming and her stylistic choices are crucial. Two of the main elements of her style are the lighting and sound design; these connect the experiential qualities described to our physical experience of
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The film. Through the dimming of the light, the characters and spectators not only see the events but also rely on other sources of sensory knowledge; namely, on senses that are more associated with direct skin contact: thermoception, nociception, touch, proprioception, and the vestibular sense.

The materiality of the diegetic world comes to our awareness not just through sight but also through these sensory modes of exploration. This is the main idea that underlies my understanding of this film adaptation and the differentiation between observational and sensory description. One of the triumphs of Arnold’s approach is that despite the narrative cuts made from the book, the film still represents the core of the romantic relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine. It represents the social themes behind this relationship and adds a level of experiential content that is particular to this film adaptation of Wuthering Heights and that cannot be found to the same extent in other film adaptations or in the source novel itself.

This type of cinematic adaptation of a novel can help us redefine the concept of description by establishing the difference between a description that is made by a third-person observer who describes a certain physical and material world and a description that is made in the first person by the perceiver himself, which not only gives shape to that physical and material world but also simultaneously shapes a subjective way of experiencing that world.

Many of the stylistic elements of Arnold’s film, such as the use of darkness, the close (rather than full) views of parts of the characters’ bodies, and the use of a hand-held camera, are not just used for aesthetic effect; rather, they work together to shift our engagement with the story from an observational perspective to a direct testimonial of the events. This is noted by the characters themselves. For instance, after Catherine meets the rich family of Edgar Linton, her relationship with Heathcliff goes on a downward spiral, and she accuses Heathcliff of mutism, “You never have anything to say,” says Catherine, to which Heathcliff replies, “You never complained before.” That the lack of words becomes a gap between the two shows that Catherine steps away from the original basis of their relationship; that is, the connection between what is unsaid and what is merely experienced through physical contact and the senses.

This implies that a film style based on the experiential qualities of the senses is used not just for its stylistic effect but also for its interconnectedness with the development of the characters and their relationships. In fact, when a gap is opened in the relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff, there is a sort of silence, and a break occurs in the sensory and experiential content of the film. The senses seem to be paused, and they resume only upon Heathcliff’s return as an adult and the restarting of their relationship. Heathcliff slowly starts remembering their past through sensory images. Upon his return, Heathcliff evokes and invokes his sensory memories, and the film becomes a mixture of experiential content and a more conventional narrative content that is based on the verbal interaction between the characters. Nevertheless, the climax and resolution also arrive in the form of a sensory element: the Wuthering Heights wind that appears as Heathcliff digs up Catherine’s grave and prevents him from opening the coffin blows, as if delivering a message.
In summary, Arnold’s cinematic approach to Brontë’s Wuthering Heights results in an adaptation that is original not only because it rearranges the narrative and provides a fresh new take on the characters but also because it powerfully delivers the story’s experiential content, which is only incidental in the original book, and makes it a central tenet of the spectator’s engagement with the story. In other words, the description of the physical and material world of the story, which was observational in most of Brontë’s novel, becomes the very engine of Arnold’s film through the voice of the two narrators and through the characters’ observational description.

This is the reason behind my distinction between the two modes of description. In this sense, it is not sufficient to note that Arnold’s film uses minimal dialogue because the dialogue could well be minimal in this regard and still be descriptive and rely on an observant and distant camera. Arnold’s approach is given depth by its use of minimal dialogue while remaining participative in the characters’ perceptual experiences and development. This approach certainly manifests itself in differing configurations in light of the adaptation of different literary works; however, in the context of Wuthering Heights as filmed by Arnold, it gains even more weight, given the sensory nature of the story’s location. With her experiential approach, Arnold manages to develop the characters and ensures the progress of the story while also delivering a specific experience of space and materiality that does justice to “an area where the wind blows so strongly that it makes a terrifying roaring” (Urban Dictionary).

By introducing these ideas of experientiality to adaptation studies, I hope to show that the senses and some aspects of perceptual experience and multisensory aesthetics can efficiently deliver not only cinematic content but also subjective and cultural content from which we gain access to the characters’ internal modes of sensory perception and emotional experience of the world around them. The perceptual experiences of characters can provide a great deal of insight into collective aspects of our cultures and, at the same time, to the construction of gender, race and social issues, and themes.

By advocating the experiential value of this film, I do not make a judgmental comparison between the media of film and literature; I only indicate a specific difference in the approaches of these two media. Arnold’s adaptation of Wuthering Heights deserves a closer look because it raises important challenges that can fuel a discussion on the nature of film adaptation. One of the most interesting aspects of Arnold’s film is that Arnold tells a story that still somewhat resonates with the original story; although she eliminates some parts of the original narrative, she retains some of the core layers of the narrative and the themes. The mode in which she delivers that content, however, deserves attention because it eliminates many of the conventional devices used by film, such as dialogue and a narrator’s voice; instead, she uses a sensory and perceptual engagement between the spectators and the characters, thus cueing strong visceral sensations that appear haptically immanent rather than simply shown visually.

Among all the film adaptations of Wuthering Heights, Arnold’s adaptation is perhaps the one that diverges most from the original storyline; nevertheless, her
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adaptation most effectively captures the sensory spirit of the landscape and the material world expressed in Brontë’s novel.

References


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