

## ***The Wise: An Animated Adaptation of Thai Contemporary Literature***

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### **Abstract**

Most of animated adaptations in Thailand come from literary works. However, the animation's inventiveness has been inhibited by its fidelity on the literary source. Although fidelity discourse cannot be ignored in adaptation since it creates a strong connection to the original, I contend that not only similarities, but also differences, are essential for the dialogue between the source text and film. This paper investigates animated adaptations from literary work. It seeks to explore how literature and animation correspond and interact between their boundaries. Jorgen Bruhn (2013)'s concept of dialogical adaptation was contextualized and used as theoretical framework for my analysis. This concept has also been put into practice through my animated film, *The Wise*, based on Panu Trivej's short story Nak Chalad Mue Archeep (2006). The dialogical adaptation approach is adopted to examine how my animation project reinterprets and reconstructs the source text in another medium. Contra the traditional approach of a one-directional transformative process from the literary source to the filmic result, the study conveys adaptation as an intertextual process. This article offers some observations of the development of animated adaptation from contemporary literature, with attention to independent animators who work as an adapter, as well as an author. This paper encapsulates both practice and theory and the findings are applicable to animators who engage transposing literary work into animation. The case study could also expand the area of literature to animated film adaptation.

Keywords: Animated Adaptation, Animation

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## Introduction

Thai animated films are mainly adapted from Thai classic literature. For example, *The Adventure of Sudsakorn* (1979), the first Thai animated feature created by Payut Ngaokrachang was based closely on the classic literature *Phra Apai Manee* (1964) written by Sunthorn Pu; *Khan Kluay* (2006), the first 3D Animated feature from Kantana Animation Studio, was inspired by a historical war story and based some of its story on the historical source text; The animation *The Life of Buddha* (2007) paid homage to the biographical story of the Buddha and his early life as prince Siddhartha from the Buddhist scripture Tripitaka; The animated feature *The Story of Mahajanaka* (2014) transposed the book of the same name written by King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1999) into animation. These examples of animated adaptations share affinity in terms of adapting from the classic literature. These classic stories have already been well-known and popularized over and over in various forms such as books, comics and films. Even though many of the classic stories have proved to be enjoyable to wide audience, there are a plenty of contemporary literary work awaits to be explored and adapted. This paper, therefore, urges local animators to read and give attention to contemporary literature. This could open up a conversation about the possibility of variety of content for Thai animated film.

When working on adaptations, Thai animators face the challenge in reworking the source regarding the issue of fidelity. I agree with Stam's statement "fidelity in adaptation is literally impossible" since there is an "automatic difference" between novel and film due to the change of medium (2005, p. 17). Not only novels use words and film uses images to tell story, their ways of expression also work differently in details. For example, firstly, written text allows readers to interpret its layers at their own pace while film constructs a pace for its audience. Secondly, in novels, the narrator can explain and clarify the connection between characters, places or things. This is not always the case in film. It is the spectators who are required to make such connection of things in a shot. Thirdly, while film can show everything in a shot to give information of story and characters, book authors have to write out each element to describe a scene. According to these differences of the media, changes are necessary in order to transform one medium into another. Therefore, as John M. Desmond & Peter Hawkes noted, fidelity should be "used as a descriptive term that allows discussion of the relationship between two companion works" (2006, p.3). The idea of fidelity should not restrict 'new' possibilities the adaptation could offer.

Stam (2005) mentioned how critics focus on what is lost from the literary source rather than what is gained from the filmic adaptation. This issue of fidelity treats the source superior than the final result. Some animators even lack interest in working on adaptation because of the perceived notion that adaptation is secondary to the source text. Thus a question in their state of authorship remains. To free the perception that adaptation is secondary to its original source text, we need to consider the nature of cinema. As Dan Harries noted "from its inception, cinema arose out of a discourse of intertextuality by recycling, reconfiguring and borrowing from other modes of entertainment" (Dan Harries, 2000, p. 11). This statement affirms the idea that the process of adaptation has already been part of nature of cinema which involves an interrelationship between text – intertextuality. To the further extend, adaptation is a work process to all art forms and also the way we live our lives. Adaptation in this research context is thus defined as a process of transposing one medium into another,

not just a final product of an adapted source. This paper emphasizes adaptation with 'open structuralism' (Gerard Genette, 1997, ix). An open structure, as Stam noted, "constantly reworked and reinterpreted by a boundless context, the text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating intertext, seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation" (2005, P.15). Adaptation, therefore, is an interpretive approach to rework the source. Contra its old perceived notion as a one-way directional process from text to film, this paper emphasizes adaptation as 'a dialogic two-way process' (Bruhn, 2013, p.69) which focuses on an interaction between the literary source and the filmic result, as well as other cross-references in the transforming process.

Unlike academic paper which focuses on an analysis of text-to-screen adaptation, this paper looks for a model of how animated adaptation functions both textually and practically. Therefore, the following works discussed in this paper shall map out my practice context. The selected examples shall be analyzed as they could serve as cross-references to my work-in-progress film. My observations in the animated adaptations seek to discuss how animators rework literary texts in their films. I have divided the examples into three categories according to the approaches adopted in the adaptations.

### **Amalgamating Filmic and Literary Expression: *The Man with the Beautiful Eyes* (2000)**

Jonathan Hodgson's *The Man with the Beautiful Eyes* (2000) was based on Charles Bukowski's poem of the same name. The story is about children whose parents forbade them to enter a strange house. The children disobeyed and went to see the house. They found a man who they thought as a cool guy. Unlike what their parents had warned, the man greeted them briefly and nothing bad happened to them. Later the children went back to the house and found out it was burnt down. they never saw the man with the beautiful eyes again. The poem reflects fascination, fear, doubt and silliness of reality during childhood. Bendazzi stated "The film describes children's fascination about a man on society's margin, drunk and doped, yet real and free" (Bendazzi, 2015, p.72). Despite evenness of the poem's mood and tone, the last part of the poem expresses the children's fear which serves as a social comment to its readers:

"...and we were afraid then that all throughout our lives things like that would happen, that nobody wanted anybody to be strong and beautiful like that, that others would never allow it, and that many people would have to die". (*The Man with the Beautiful Eyes*, 1992).

In the animated adaptation, one of the children in the story serves as a narrator who expresses his own fascination, thoughts, doubt and fear throughout the story. Hodgson has brought the narrator from the original poem into his animation to give the animated film a more "literary" feel. In this animated film, the animator employed simple camera movement such as zoom-in and panning as a transition to change images and time. Cuttings was also used but they are matched with the other transitions seamlessly. Hodgson also adopted typography and patterns in the animated film. This use of the typography and patterns serves as a hypermedia which distances the reader from the animated world. The eclectic mix of filmic images, texts, pattern and collaged graphic elements gives a contrast to the evenness of the narrative, as

well as to the smooth and calm voice of narrator. Moreover, the animator's interpretation of the original text has transformed into symbolic images. This can be exemplified by a shot where the viewer sees a man watering flower on a concrete side and the flower dies when the narrator said "our parents are shame that they were not like that man" (Bukowski, 1992). The frame in this shot splits between tile-patterned concrete path and grass which symbolize conformed man on the society's standard or the parents (tile-patterned concrete path) and the free, and natural man (grass). The flowers growing on the concrete side, which refer to children, die once the man carrying a toxic and dangers liquid tank on his back waters them. Both visual relations and the symbolic images create uniqueness to the animated adaptation. Despite the fact that the animation straightforwardly reads the original poem to its audience, Hodgson's *The Man with the Beautiful Eyes* (1999) requires its readers to read and interpret the relationship between the filmic images and the original poem. The animated adaptation possesses original quality in its own right while showing a strong relation to the source.

It should be noted that not only the Bukowski's poem that the animated film speaks to, the animation also connects its aware readers to other cross references. For example, the approach of using narrator and the use of transition to create literary expression have been done before in many other animated adaptations, for example, Caroline Leaf's *The Street* (1976) which transposed Moerdecai Richler's short story *The Street* (1969) into animation; Leaf's later animated film *The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa* (1977) which based on Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis* (1915); Ishu Patel's *Top Priority* (1981) which adapted from short story of the same name. These mentioned examples share affinity to Hodgson's animated adaptation in terms of artistic expression of free flow images and transition. However, Hodgson emphasizes more use of symbolic images for the readers to interpret while Patel gives a straightforward translation, honest figurative images which fits his film content. *The Man with the Beautiful Eyes* (2000) also shares similarity in terms of artistic approach to Leaf's mentioned films, but it contains more variety of graphic elements. Moreover, Leaf expertises the use of morphing as transition throughout her story while Hodgson mixes and matches the transitions to create the flow to his animated film.

#### **N (2008): Cinematic Expression with Stylized Photographic Images.**

N (2008), a graphic video series, was adapted from a horror short story written by Stephen King. The animated series was drawn by artist Alex Maleev and colored by Jose Villarrubia. This animated adaptation was used to promote the Stephen King's up-coming collection. N was a nested story about related characters. The story began with a woman named Sheila wrote to her friend Charlie about her suspicion on the suicide of her brother Johnny or Dr. John Bonsaint. Dr. Bonsaint was a psychiatrist who committed suicide after his patient, referred as "N", killed himself. N was diagnosed as suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and paranoid delusion. He shared his belief to Dr. Bonsaint that a circle of stones in the Ackerman's Field was a doorway to another world. After N's death, Dr. Bonsaint also suffered from OCD and he went to the Ackerman's Field. Driven to madness, he also committed suicide. The story revealed that Shiela later killed herself in the same manner to her brother and her friend Charlie was going to visit the Ackerman's field in Maine.

This adaptation shares a strong connection to the novel. The adapter, Marc Guggenheim, straightforwardly retold the novel with filmic expressions. The graphic video stylizes photographic images with outlining and coloring. The characters and setting in the novella are transformed via cinematic approaches such as cutting, panning and zooming to create filmic effects. The graphic artists make good use of camera angles. Many of jump cuts are used to express uneasy feeling of the character N. The order of sequences is clearly arranged. The timing is also sharp and able to build up the story pace into climax where Dr. Bonsaint was driven to madness. Despite its very limited animation, this adaptation effectively utilized cinematic expressions to retell the original source text.

The artistic direction of the adaptation, *N* (2008), shares similarity to the animated film trailer titled *The Morning Sun is Too Hot to Sit Sipping Coffee*. Chanon Treenet, an independent Thai animator, is developing this animated adaptation. Treenet chose the South East Asian Writer Award Winning Thai novel of the same name written by Jadet Kamjorndet (2011). The novel told a story of a new veteran who dreamed about opening a coffee shop near the railway with his friend. He also dreamed about a beautiful woman. The setting of the story was the southern Thai provinces where South Thailand insurgency was ongoing. Showing a contrast between the character's own dream and reality, Chanon chose water color as a medium to render his drawn animation. This animated trailer shares affinity to the graphic video series in terms of limited animation, as well as of filmic approaches, for example, the use of camera and image layering techniques. However, unlike the Stephen King's adaptation, the Thai animated trailer empties all dialogue. This could be a challenge or an advantage for Treenet to recreate the novel in animated film form.

### ***Nine* (2014): Shifting Genre**

In Thailand, although adaptations from the classic is much recognized, the short animated film *Nine* (2014) showed an attempt to retold a graphic fiction. The animation was directed by Chawalit Kaewmanee and Wanichaya Phraejunya from The Monk Studio. *Nine* (2014) is adapted from *Nine Lives* by Songsin Tiewsomboon. The animators selected the chapter "Live Forever" and based the animated world on the novel setting. In the original text, *Nine Lives* told a story of a grey cat who gave his heart to a devil in an exchange of immortality. He enjoyed his long live until he wanted to know how to love. He went to see the devil once again and tried to negotiate his heart back. The devil was dying since his immortality was given to the grey cat, for instead having a heart to love. Wondering about love, the cat lived forever.

The original fiction fits drama genre and illustrates serene mood and tone throughout the whole story. However, the animators chose to add more fantasy to the action and setting in the animation. The animated film, *Nine*, told a story about a grey cat who was chased by a herd of wild bulls. The cat accidentally entered a world of devil. The devil took the cat's heart. Once the cat woke up, he felt strength and conquered all of his enemies. The more victory, the more he took lives. Once he realized, the devil who took his heart disappeared. The grey cat became a devil himself. The animated adaptation shows an obvious relation to the original source in terms of the main characters and setting, as well as some decorative elements shown in the source

fiction. However, the animators explore another perspective which make the adaptation shift to action-fantasy genre. The animated film discards the dramatic and poetic feel presented in the original fiction. In contrast to tranquility of mood and tone presented in the original graphic fiction, the animated adaptation offers a mix of artistic styles to show a contrast between the sweet grey cat in the beginning of the film and the devil-becoming cat in the end. While the original fiction presents a lonely cat who wonders about love throughout the whole story, the adaptation offers the contrast – from an innocent to a monstrous character. Moreover, the story pace also significantly changes. In the original fiction, readers know it was ninety-nine years that the cat lived happily and enjoyed his longevity until he yearned for love. However, the animation significantly cuts the story time. Within a day and night, the weak, chased cat gained an extra power from the devil. These differences depart the adaptation from the source from where they have shared a strong connection. Discarding key moments in contemplating on life presented in the original fiction, the animated film offers action-fantasy narrative and the specific pleasures of its own version.

### ***The Wise* (Work-in-Progress, 2017)**

My project, *The Wise*, was adapted from a dystopian short-story, Nak Chalad Mue Archeep (2006), written by Panu Trivej. The story depicts a futuristic view of Thailand in the age of hyper-industrialization. The setting of this short story locates in Thailand's capital in the year 2143. In a totalitarian society, each of Thai people is required to learn only one thing. Freedom is so restricted that learning extra skills is prohibited. Gaining all knowledge is solely allowed to selected minority candidates under The Wise scheme. *The Wise* tells a story of Salika, who works as The Wise. She gives talk about knowledge in various fields depending on request or her own choice if there is no request from the audience. One day she was challenged with a question of how to boil rice by an anonymous man. The man is actually a rice chef working at a restaurant. Once she gets to know him, the two shares their stories and thoughts which reflects the society they are living in.

The original short fiction shows an influence from dystopian novels of the twentieth century. For example, the idea that the knowledge is solely kept within the minority and the act of learning extra skills is illegal in Trivej's story shares affinity with *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is also an obvious influential example. Salika life in Trivej's short story is similar to Atwood's main character – Offred, just in a better way. The underground group which the chef joins its community to learn extra skills in Trivej's story echoes The Mayday resistance, an underground network working to overthrow the government in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The secret relationship between Salika and the chef also reminds reader to the relationship between the commander and Offred in the Atwood's novel. This short story of Trivej interweaves a number of literary intertexts: the dystopian novel as mentioned earlier; the romance, implied in upcoming relationship between Salika and the chef; the bible, found in the speech Salika gives to her audience in the last act.

My adaptation maintains these literary cues such as the conventions of the dystopian novel, a touch of romance implied in the chef's visit, as well as Salika's final speech found in the bible. In addition, the adaptation elaborates filmic expressions, as well as

literary expressions. For example, *The Wise* comprises two artistic styles which I name a solid and fluid dimension. The solid dimension offers cinematic world where the characters are living and this takes most parts of the animated film. The fluid dimension employs free-flow transitions in order to present imaginative expressions. This stylistic direction is used when the characters share their own thoughts and ideas. In the animated adaptation, many of textual elements in the original source will be discarded, for example: a few scenes of Salika's given speech; characters of Salika's father and his adopted son; a scene of rice field where Salika and the chef go picnicking.

In *The Wise*, there is a specific interpretation of the literary source which raises three keywords - knowledge, questions, power. Altogether, the words form a sentence – “knowledge questions power”. This is not only the key message of this animated film, but each word also represents each character. “Knowledge” stands for Salika or the Wise. “Questions” represents the chef who is also an underground protestor to the government's scheme. “Power” is a symbol of the totalitarian society in which the characters are living. Some of the interpretation has a strong connection to the source text, for example, the word “knowledge” has already been described Salika as shown in the original story:

“Her job is not teaching or giving any knowledge. She herself is knowledge - a visible and tangible knowledge” (Trivej, 2006, p.108).

However, some of the interpretation departs the animated film from its source text. For example, the key message - “knowledge questions power” – serves as a read-between-the-line message from the animated film to its audience. This also opens up possibilities to reread the source text. In summary, *The Wise* is still an on-going project which serves as a model to understand animated adaptation, and to know how the animator reworks the literary source in practice. Since this animated film is not yet complete, it opens to changes and possibilities of re-discussion with the source text as well as other cross references. However, even at this stage of the film's pre-production, the source texts have already been through a series of operations: the process of selection and elimination, addition, concretization. This surfaces the important issues for adaptation which Stam once marked – “what principle guides the process of selection, what is the drift of these changes and alterations? What principles orient the choices.” (Stam, 2005, p.34) These questions await answers and should be discussed further.

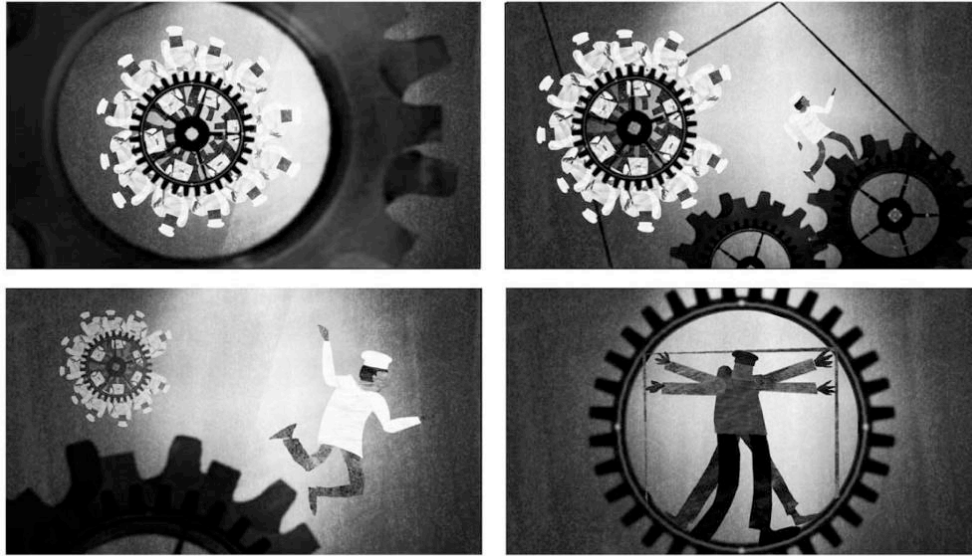


Figure 1: Storyboard from The Wise (Work-in-Progress, 2017).

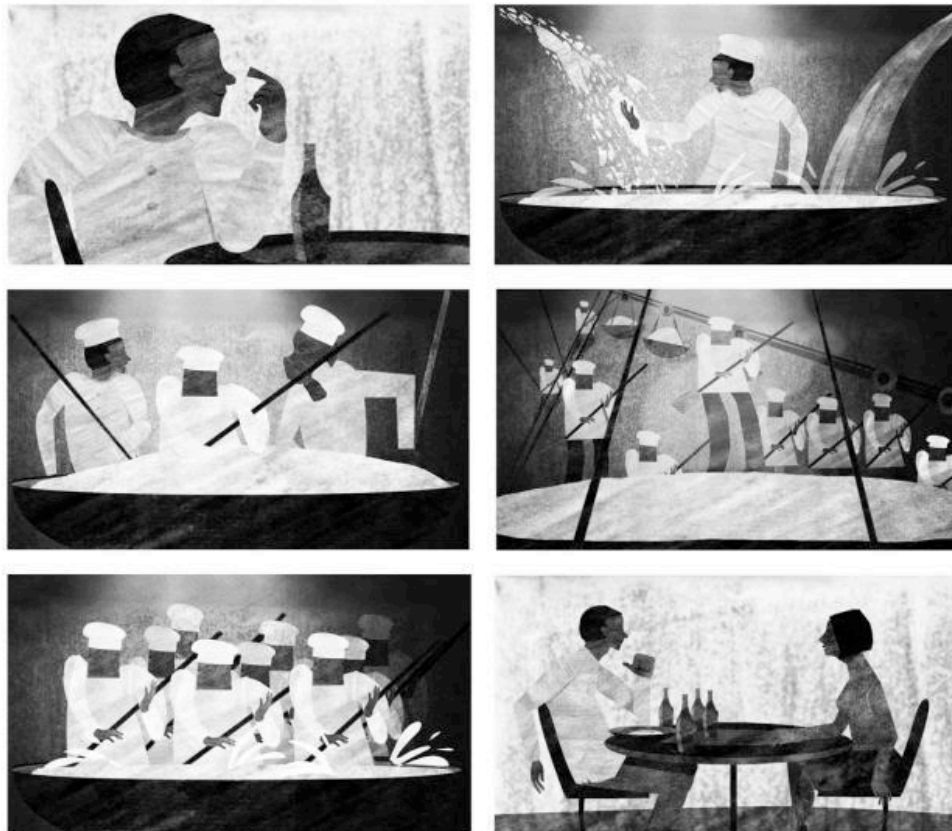


Figure 2: Storyboard from The Wise (Work-in-Progress, 2017).

## Conclusion

Animated adaptations from contemporary literature have constantly been produced internationally. Literature offers cultural values, ideas and perspectives of the time period. Therefore, animated adaptation from the contemporary literary work can reflect its present culture. Recently, according to the article *Filming begins on E4*



thriller *Kiss Me First* (2016), Lottie Moggach's psychological thriller book *Kiss Me First* has been adapted by Bryan Elsley for digital television channel E4. This series combines live action with Computer Generated virtual world sequence and it will be air in 2018. The adaptation reveals lives in social network. It tells the story of Leila, a lonely teenage girl who is addicted to a fictional online gaming site called Agora. Leila meets a friend named Tess in the game and they become friends in real life. However, Tess disappears and Leila is drawn into investigating her friend's disappearance. The adaptation maintains an idea from the original novel about virtual life and how teenagers live their 'other' lives in the online world. The content reminds its audience of the society in which they are now living. This is what contemporary literature can offer – a content in present time, as Graham Swift noted, "what's most current in our lives offered back to us in fictional guise" (Swift, 2011).

This paper thus encourages Thai animators to use contemporary literature as a source for animation. Adaptation is contextualized and used as an interpretative act of transposing medium from one to another. In this article, interrelationship between texts is emphasized while fidelity is reconsidered as an open relationship between the primary and the secondary text. Both of similarities and differences between the source and result are important for adaptation. The combination of fidelity and alterity<sup>1</sup> makes unique quality in adaptation. This article repositions adaptation and frees it from the hierarchical relations between the source text and the filmic result. In order to understand different approaches in animated adaptations, the examples of animated adaptations have been analyzed. The analysis also highlights filmic capacities which add specific quality to the adaptation. My own work-in-progress project, *The Wise*, is used as a case study of artistic correspondences between the literature and film.

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<sup>1</sup> The state of being other or different, diversity or otherness (Oxford English Dictionary, 2017).

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