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## Presenting an Asian culture to a western audience

*Crazy Rich Asians* from novel to Hollywood movie

Bachelor's project in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Eli Løfaldli

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**Summary:**

Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013) was adapted into a Hollywood movie in 2018. As such, this paper analyses differences in novel and adaptation, related to formal aspects, such as narrative style, music and editing, as well as generic conventions connected to the genre of romantic comedies. There is also an overall focus on how the Asian culture is presented to the mainly western audience of the Hollywood movie.

**Samandrag:**

Kevin Kwan's bok *Vilt rike* (2013) var adaptert til en Hollywood-film i 2018. Denne oppgåva går ut på å analysere forskjellane mellom boka og adaptasjonen, spesielt knytt til dei formelle aspekta, som narrativ stil, musikk og redigering, men også i forhold til dei generiske konvensjonane knytt til sjangeren romantisk komedie. Det er alt i alt ein gjennomgåande fokus på korleis den asiatiske kulturen kjem til uttrykk knytt til at tilskodarane av ein Hollywood-film i hovudsak er vestlege.

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## Introduction

“The book is better” is a common phrase uttered after booklovers have seen the adaptation of a novel. Often, the feeling comes from a thought of the novel bringing *more*: more information, more relationships, more connections and more emotions, along with the fact that their reading experience is not fully recreated in the adaptation. This often relates to fidelity as an ideal, or the sense that the adaptation was not true to the novel it was based upon. Today though, it is treated as a given within adaptation studies that fidelity is “a wholly inappropriate and unhelpful criterion for either understanding or judgment” of an adaptation (McFarlane, 15). After reading a novel, everyone has their own interpretation, and every interpretation cannot be adapted to the screen. Brian McFarlane discusses how the novel will give readers insight into the lives of the characters in “their spoken words and through the discursive prose that surrounds them” (22), and underlines the fact that this needs to be presented on the screen in a different matter, mainly through the *mise-en-scène*, which denotes what is physically on the screen, editing and music.

In short, the formal aspects for a novel and an adaptation are different. Ben Nichols (12) defines the formal context to be medium-specific qualities, the certain ways to achieve an effect that has to do with the medium itself. For a movie this will involve camerawork, costume, sound design, editing and casting to name examples. There are also shared formal contexts between a movie and a literary work, such as genre and narrative, but there are differences in the execution. Time-management is also a formal context that needs to be addressed, since there are vast differences in how much you can fit into a movie compared to a novel.

*Crazy Rich Asians* is a novel by Kevin Kwan, published in 2013, that was adapted into a Hollywood romantic comedy and released in cinemas in 2018. The story follows Rachel (played by Constance Wu in the film), a local New Yorker that travels together with her boyfriend, Nick (Henry Golding), to his home in Singapore to attend his best friend’s wedding. While there, Rachel learns that Nick turns out to be the heir to a vast fortune and that his family is “crazy rich”. Nick and Rachel’s relationship is threatened when it turns out that Nick’s family disapproves of Rachel. Even though the novel can be

categorized as a romantic comedy, a romantic comedy on the screen has more conventions attached to it, and changes were made to accord to these conventions, such as making scenes more romantic, and having the “happily ever after” ending expected in a romantic comedy.

The adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians*, directed by Jon M. Chu, has taken advantage of the formal aspects connected to that of the screen to show off the history and the personalities the characters in the book are described to have. This paper will therefore focus on the differences between the formal contexts of the book and the film adaptation and how these are translated into the new medium. This will be done by comparing and contrasting the narrative style, discussing the importance of music, and how the editing works to keep the audience engaged. There will be an overall focus on how these accommodations relate to bringing the Asian culture to a Hollywood scene with a mainly western audience. Finally, the focus will be turned onto the genre of romantic comedy, and which changes were made to make *Crazy Rich Asians* more generic.

### **Narrative style**

Narration, or the “process of storytelling” (Nichols, 65), is one of the challenges posed by adapting a literary work to the screen. Narrative tools such as narrator, plot, and characters are important for both literary works and films, the difference lies in how they are presented (Gran, 3). McFarlane has described narrative as “a series of events, sequentially and/or consequentially connected by virtue of their involving a continuing set of characters” (19). The narrative style will then be *how* the story is presented to the audience.

Kwan’s novel is littered with details and extravagancies, often used to offer a satirical view of its characters. The characters themselves, their mannerisms and their unattainable “crazy rich” lifestyle drive the plot onwards. For instance, when talking of Colin and Araminta’s upcoming wedding, where 888 guests are invited, the narrator compares it to Astrid and Michael’s wedding, describing it as a “very private, very small ceremony” (75). For the reader, this would provide a perception of what they would consider a small ceremony, before subverting expectations in specifying “(only three hundred guests at her grandmother’s house)” (Kwan, 75). Even with this specification,

there is still an understatement in what the narrator calls a “house” and what the reader would imagine a house to be. The reader has not yet been introduced to the grandmother’s house, Tyersall Park, which turns out to be “more like a palace”, in Rachel’s words (158).

In a novel, there is time to give backstories to all the characters and their relationships with one another. There is no time to elaborate on every character’s backstory in a film, so the adaptation needs to *show* the audience how the characters’ relationships are, such as that Eleanor (Michelle Yeoh) and Su Yi (Lisa Lu). Eleanor’s history with Su Yi is more quickly delved upon in the adaptation than in the novel. In the dumpling scene at Tyersall Park (01:07:18), Rachel notices Eleanor’s engagement ring prior to Su Yi entering and commenting on Eleanor’s lacking skill in dumpling-making, saying how she has “lost her touch” (01:11:21). Afterwards, Eleanor explains to Rachel in private the history of her engagement ring; Su Yi never approved of Eleanor and when her husband wanted to propose, Su Yi would not let him have the family ring. This explains the hostility and distance between these two characters. It is not until the end of the book when Eleanor explains how “I know my mother-in-law never approved of me” (509) where readers are privy to Eleanor’s strained relationship with Su Yi. This makes for a narrative that is more sympathetic towards Eleanor, since the audience are privy to her motivation.

Another stylistic choice Kwan made in the writing of the novel is the frequent use of footnotes to explain certain aspects of the Asian, and more specifically Chinese or Singaporean, culture. This means that when the characters use slang in Hokkien or Cantonese, there is an abundance of foreign dishes, or there are discussions of the local schools, the story is not interrupted with unnatural translations or explanations. The characters that use these phrases are fully aware of what they mean, and what they are eating, but the footnotes are used as a tool to give the readers who are unfamiliar with the cultures and languages the opportunity to understand more of the society and the culture behind it.

To illustrate, there is an explanation of *Ipoh hor fun*: “A delicacy from Ipoh, Malaysia – rice noodles served in a clear soup with prawns, shredded chicken, and fried shallots”

(308), and an explanation of the phrase *Gar gee nang*: “Hokkien for ‘same kind’ or ‘our own people’, usually used to refer to family or clan associations” (198). When it comes to translating the cultural explanations onto the screen, director Jon Chu faced an issue; he wants the western audience to be able to follow the story, but at the same time avoid unnecessary explanations that hinders the flow of the scenes. To accommodate this, different techniques are used in the adaptation. For the dishes, there is no need to explain what they are, since the film has the advantage of showing the audience, instead of having to explain it. When it comes to phrases in different languages, it is approached in different manners. At times there are subtitles involved, such as in the dumpling scene (01:07:18), but the film also uses Rachel as a conductor of information; Eleanor explains the phrase ‘our own kind of people’ to Rachel during the mah-jongg scene (01:43:34).

At other times there is no explanation for the cultural traditions, but the context of the scene manages to convey meanings effectively to those who need it, without pausing to precisely explain the meaning. An example of this can be seen when Mr. Goh comments on Rachel’s red dress, stating that red is a lucky colour “if you’re an envelope” (00:31:58). This refers to the Chinese tradition of *hong bao*, which is explained with a footnote in the book: “Mandarin for little red packets of money that are given out by married adults and the elderly during Chinese New Year to children and unmarried young people as an act of well-wishing” (315). Jon Chu told in an interview how “[Singapore] is a real place, with real culture, history and tradition, and instead of just giving [the audience] answers to their questions, we want them to have conversations” (Yang). The same goes for the mah-jongg scene; a western audience would most likely be unfamiliar with the game, and the rules are never explained. However, with help from context clues and the work of the actors, the main point of both of these exchanges are still retained: it is made clear that what Rachel is wearing is not good enough, and how Rachel is giving up a winning hand, showing Eleanor that she knows how to make sacrifices.

## **Music**

One formal aspect that is significantly more present in films than in novels is the use of music. The effects of music are many, such as providing mood, implying character’s

emotions or feelings, and offer a sense of continuity, to name a few. Music also helps the audience in indicating the geography, culture and era in which a scene is set (Davidson, 213), something which can clearly be seen in the *Crazy Rich Asians* adaptation. In the opening credits an upbeat jazz song with lyrics in Cantonese prominently sets the scene and indicates the Asian culture that will be delved in throughout the adaptation.

Throughout the adaptation, of the 14 songs on the soundtrack, only 3 of them are sung in English. While the continuous use of Asian terms and Asian languages in the books are a reminder of the setting, music is effective in immediately communicating the setting to the audience, even before characters are introduced.

One of the songs in English is “Can’t help falling in love”. Originally performed by Elvis Presley and published in 1961, this song has countless covers made of it. Using such a popular and widely known song that audience members will most likely recognise and have a relationship with, means that their personal histories are brought in when watching the film (Davidson, 214). This song is listed as one of Billboard’s “Top 50 Love Songs of all time” (Bronson) and immediately brings a romantic ambiance, especially in using it during the wedding scene. Other established pop songs used in the adaptation are Madonna’s “Material Girl” and Cold Play’s “Yellow”, but these are translated and performed in Chinese. This means that the audience will still have connotations and histories connected with the songs, but the songs continue to remind the audience of the geography and the culture *Crazy Rich Asians* is set in. It is also a feature used in bringing the Asian culture to a western audience. It is a common phrase that music brings people together, and in mixing familiar songs in a new language, the distance between cultures is lessened.

As previously mentioned, music can also provide continuity. This happens already in the opening scene, after Eleanor has bought the Hotel, the song “Money (That’s What I Want)” plays in Cantonese while the camera focuses on the face of a young Nicholas (00:03:04-00:03:32). The music goes into the background as the audience is introduced to Rachel, but when an adult Nick comes into the frame, the song picks up, this time in English (00:04:43-00:05:05). Even if the audience is unaware of the effects that music has, it always has some effect on the experience of watching a film (Davidson, 212). Here, the music tells the story of how Nick as an adult has more connections to the

western world and his life in New York, than he has to his home in Singapore. His cultural identity is questioned; where does he belong? The question of when, or if, Nick will come back to Singapore and take over the family business, is one of the major conflicts in the novel. Nick is struggling to realise that his family has expectations to him returning to Singapore, but Nick is focused on his life in New York. The music mirrors this duality in presenting Nick with lyrics in both Chinese and English.

### **Editing**

Nichols describes editing as “the primary means of building a syntagmatic chain of shots and scenes into a complete film” (38). It is during editing that it is decided what the audience gets to see, and how they see it. What type of shot should be used? How long should the scene be? Whose reaction should the audience be privy to? The choices related to editing also include *what* information is provided, and in *what order* the information is presented. When Nick proposes to Rachel, the scene cuts off before the audience hears her answer (01:40:50) leaving them to contemplate her response, and it also brings more tension into the following mah-jongg scene when the audience is waiting for the revelation. The original shot did include Rachel declining, but as Chu comments “it felt anticlimactic” (commentary track, 01:40:46). This way, the audience have something to “hang on to” as the mah-jongg scene plays out (commentary track, 01:41:13).

The equivalent of this scene in the book does not leave you questioning the outcome. Rachel breaks up with Nick and explains how she will not marry into “a clan that thinks it’s too good to have me” (481), and how she wants her future family to be supportive, and accepting of the individual rather than the money they have. Even though the book creates tension related to the unknown future for the couple, the adaptation have Rachel explaining herself to Eleanor in the mah-jongg scene, and not to Nick. This brings forth the opposition of characters in Rachel and Eleanor. In the mah-jongg scene, Rachel is seated in the west, and Eleanor in the east, both representing their own culture and ideals. Rachel shows how, even though she was raised on American principles, she is able to understand what it takes to make sacrifices for other’s happiness. In the novel, the cultural differences between Rachel and Eleanor are present, but not as highlighted.

Another prominent form for editing relates to the framing of the shot, and this can be a tool in adapting certain aspects of the novel onto the screen. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the use of mirrors is one of these tools. When Astrid is in the jewellery shop (00:16:18), she wears big sunglasses when entering, but takes them off to face the camera when she talks to the young girl about her plush toy, as Nick's voiceover tells of her "big heart". Throughout the rest of the scene, the camera only catches her profile, and her face is only shown through a mirror. When Astrid arrives at home from her shopping trip and is hiding her purchases from her husband (Pierre Png), she is again shown in front of the mirror while taking off her earrings (02:23:33-02:23:43). When she reads a bedside story to her son we see her face again. This creates a distance between Astrid and the audience, underlining the emotional distance Astrid has created between herself and the rest of the world. The audience is presented with her face directly when Astrid is being herself and showing her emotions, if that is when she is talking to children, talking to Rachel or has a devastating breakdown in the car after her husband admitting to having an affair (01:21:57). In other shots, when looking through a mirror, this is the Astrid she wants the world to see.

This also reflects the feeling of Astrid from the novel. She has been raised to be modest yet fashionable, private, and distant towards the public, and where dramatics is seen as attention seeking. Eleanor explains to her group of friends that Astrid's mother has an agreement with magazines, that Astrid's picture is not to be published, and Eleanor explains how the family "would rather die than appear in print" (25). When Astrid attends a gala, the attendees gossip over Astrid and how they fail to recognize her, when a family friend explains who she is and how she "loathes to be photographed" (45). Astrid is disappointed that she is becoming known to these people since "Paris was her escape, and here she strove to be invisible". (45) There is a duality in Astrid's character, how she behaves in public as opposed to private settings, and the use of mirrors in the film translates this duality onto the screen.

Another character also seen in relations with mirrors is Rachel. However, when Rachel is shown in mirrors it is done with a different thematic effect than with Astrid. For Rachel, mirrors are often used in a sense of self-reflection. This can be seen in the scene where Rachel is picking out a dress to meet Nick's parents in (00:10:01), where she is

contemplating how to best present herself so that his family will approve of her. At Samsara Island, Rachel again is put in front of a mirror at the boutique (00:57:23) when she comments on the differences between herself and the other women. Again, the use of mirrors translates how Rachel in the book feels. When Rachel first visits Tyersall Park, she feels underdressed and has trepidation towards the situation (171), and in joining Araminta's bachelorette party Rachel discovers that "this was definitely not her crowd" (229). Throughout the book, Rachel is subtly compared to others, when she continuously has to correct high society members in how she is not a member of a rich family from Taipei, also named Chu. In general, the effect of the editing and the way the shots are framed show off aspects from the book in a precise and subtle way. At times, the decisions are made in regards of translating information a reader would receive in the book, to appear in the film, but it also has effect on the pacing of the movie, and creates a hold on the audience.

## **Genre**

Nichols explains how "genre films share thematic and stylistic features that become known as conventions [...]. These conventions establish a set of constraints and opportunities that individual films explore in distinct ways" (137). Further on, he states that "socially mainstream cinema is the dominant cinema", that Hollywood movies are "the primary work of filmmaking", but that "mainstream cinema does not enjoy a privileged position in term its aesthetic merits or its social significance" (138). This view is shared by Tamar James McDonald when he describes genre-films as "carrying connotations of 'American, low-brow, easy'" (7) with describing how romantic comedies are usually seen as "the lowest of the low" (7).

*Crazy Rich Asians* challenges this; it features an all Asian cast, the first film by a major Hollywood studio to do so since *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993. Director Jon Chu tells of the social impact it has had, especially for Asian Americans in relation to representation on screen. He describes how he has received much emotional feedback on the scene at the hawker centre from the audience, how they finally are able to see "four young Asian contemporary characters hanging out and having a good time" (Chu, commentary track, 00:21:47). Kwan joins in and tells of how "profound it's been for a lot of people" (commentary track, 00:22:06). The novel itself did not receive this reception, and



benefited from the attention the movie procured, ending up at the New York Times bestseller list in 2018, with sales increasing over 300 per cent from 2017 to 2018 (Cadden).

At the same time, the adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians* is at heart a generic romantic comedy. McDonald defines a romantic comedy to be “a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion” (p. 9). Romantic comedy as a literary genre also has many of these genre markers, and although the novel can also be described as a romantic comedy, the adaptation has still made changes to make it fit more to this genre description, and to adhere to the genre’s conventions. This include changing the scene of the wedding to make it more romantic and into a tear-jerker scene and also in altering the ending into an even happier one.

When talking of the wedding scene the narrator in the novel is changing between different people, making it distant and detached. The adaptation has changed this into being one of, if not *the* most romantic scenes in the movie (01:25:20-01:28:52). By having the acoustic music take over the scene with a familiar love song, and then to fade it out into complete silence as Araminta (Sonoya Mizuno) walks down the aisle, all focus should be on her, but the close-up shots of Nick and Rachel’s silent “I love you”-s turn all this romantic focus on them, and makes it a highly romantic scene.

On the matter of a happy ending, the novel focuses on how disgusted Nick is with what his family has done when investigating Rachel, so he cuts off contact and travels home with her. In this matter, Rachel and Nick still end up as a couple, but there is no resolution to Nick’s problems with his family. However, as the happy ending of the romantic comedy has become highly conventionalized (Deleyto, 2009, p. 24), the adaptation changes this ending as to fulfil the expectations of the filmic genre. In the adaptation, Rachel explains to Eleanor that she is willing to make sacrifices for Nick (in the significant mah-jongg scene (01:41:10-01:46:55)). She is willing to give up her winning hand if that means that Nick is allowed to keep his relationships with his family. Eleanor realizes that she speaks the truth when Rachel gives up the winning tile, and when Nick proposes to Rachel for the second time (01:51:28) he now has Eleanor’s ring

to do it with, showing Eleanor's approval. This means that the happy ending from the novel is made even happier in the adaptation.

The second part of a romantic comedy is the "comedy", and even though humour necessarily is seen to have the most significant part, Celestino Deleyto argues how "the comic perspective is a fundamental ingredient of what we understand by romantic comedy" (18), arguing that the role of comedy is to create a space in which reality is transformed into one where the lovers are protected in regards to "the strictures of social convention and psychological inhibitions" (18). This is also root to the "light-hearted"-ness mentioned in McDonalds master definition (9). He argues that emotional scenes are important in the romantic comedy, but that comedic interruptions are there to lighten the mood (9).

The light-heartedness creates a space in where the emotional scenes can take up space without it getting to heavy. After the wedding reception when Rachel has been blindsided with the information about her family history, and is broken-hearted at Peik Lin's, Rachel's mom, Kerry (Kheng Hua Tan), shows up to tell Rachel the truth about this history, and it turns out that Kerry's husband abused her (01:36:30-01:40:00). This emotional scene is then interjected by P.T. (Calvin Wong) and his antics bring comedic relief into the scene. The comedy and light-heartedness in the novel comes from the exaggerations, subversion of expectations, and in the contrast between the world's of the high socialite characters and the reader, and how the rich socialites are unable to apprehend the "normal" world. Neena Goh, Peik Lin's mother (played by Koh Chieng Mun) subverts expectations when she is scolding young girls at the dinner table and telling them to finish their food because "there are children starving in America?" (138). Unrelated to the adaptation, chapter 19 tells of how one of Eleanor's friends is visited by a nun who is there to cleanse the house from evil spirits and determines many of their artefacts as demonic. This comes unexpectedly and breaks up the tension since it is placed between Rachel's heartbreak and Kerry's explanation of the past.

## **Conclusion**

To reiterate the goal of this paper, looking into how the differences in formal context are expressed in translating *Crazy Rich Asians* into a film, this paper has looked at formal

aspects such as narrative style, music, editing and genre. Through taking advantage of the formal aspects related to this new medium, this adaptation explores aspects of the novel, without being bound by it. Relationships between people are explored through looks and conversation, and by using methods such as framing within mirrors, the adaptation *shows* thoughts and feelings the characters tell of in the book. Overall, the adaptation is also made to showcase an Asian culture to a western audience, by including well-known western songs sung in Chinese, and in how they decided to interpret and express the novel's footnotes in the film.

Critics of romantic comedies often focus on how “they repeatedly go over old ground without adding anything original to the mixture of traditional soundtrack song, picturesque urban vibes and initially antagonistic, ultimately blissful male and female protagonists” (McDonald, 15). As shown, *Crazy Rich Asians* may be a generic romantic comedy, but it provides much more than what is described above. Its soundtrack is described as “groundbreaking” (Brayson) in that it manages to show credit to Asian performers, and be diverse in both genres and cultures, all in a Hollywood soundtrack. The picturesque urban vibes of Singapore is alternated with the hostility of its rich inhabitants, and even though the couple end up together, it is due to Rachel's determination and willingness to sacrifice her own happiness, something that provides a less stereotypical happy ending than what is most commonly associated with romantic comedies. In short, the formal context connected with adapting *Crazy Rich Asians* into a film, gives a western audience a taste of an Asian culture as well as adhering to the expected conventions of a romantic comedy.

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