

### 12.1 Final Paper

The course began with *Charlotte's Web* and discussion of the literary elements of the story. Since I do not teach, this was a good introduction for me because I do not often think about the literary elements of a story when I am reading I just allow myself to enjoy it without getting too technical. As we moved into week two we began 'reading' movies by viewing two versions of *Charlotte's Web*. This 'reading' of movies really came from two perspectives. First there were the technical aspects of moviemaking; for example what camera angles, shot selection and sound techniques were used to develop the story. The second perspective was the use of specific moviemaking techniques and how their use actually impacted the story and how it was told. When you consider how the book version of *Charlotte's Web* tells its story versus the movie version, you have the book which gets the reader into Wilbur's head and allows the reader to experience the story from his perspective because the story is told that way. The movie director does not have that luxury of telling us the perspective the story is being told from the director has to create that perspective for us. The director does this through the use of camera angles, shot selection, editing and sound. For example, having the camera angle come directly through Wilbur's eyes with a close up shot of his snout really allows the viewer to relate to Wilbur because it feels like we are looking directly through his eyes. At this early stage in the course I was getting just the slightest hint of interpretation on the part of the director. I am not sure I would have recognized it as such or called it that at that point but I do know that I was thinking how about the telling of the same story may differ based on who tells it and to whom they are telling it. The fact that we viewed two movies based on *Charlotte's Web* and they looked and felt different and were meant for different audiences planted that seed in my head. The animated version of *Charlotte's Web* was meant for child and the live action movie was meant for both children and adults.

I have mentioned in several papers that my initial thoughts on fidelity to the original story were that a movie needed to be as close to the story told in the book as it could be. It was in week two that I started to recognize that differing interpretations of the same story are okay. Obviously that came across clearly when viewing two versions of *Charlotte's Web*. It made more sense though as I read Elizabeth Thoman's article "How to Conduct a 'Close Analysis' of a Media Text". After reading the article and thinking about the Five Core Concepts she used as the basis for her article I realized that viewer expectations are a consideration for the director. The first core concept is "all media messages are constructed". The animated version of *Charlotte's Web* was constructed for children and the live action version for adults and children. The directors targeted different and thus constructed their media message to fit that audience. This concept led me to think about expectations. I have my own expectations

about how a book should be portrayed in a movie. Everyone who has read a book will have expectations for how it should be portrayed in a movie. As I noted in week two these expectations can be limiting for the director if he is in anyway giving those expectations some consideration. How much variation between the book and the movie will an audience tolerate? At that point in the course I was not sure and suspected it might be very little, but later on I came to believe that the quality of the movie itself is a determining factor in what an audience will tolerate. In other words, a quality movie will be given more latitude in interpretation just because it is of high quality, it will have won over the audience because it is a good movie.

As we moved through week three the impact of animation was unclear to me. At first it was another medium for telling a story, however, in looking back I am able to discern two very noticeable issues. First, I am now able to recognize that my initial thinking about movies was based on my own experiences. The quality of the technology utilized has always been high during my lifetime, so I have always thought of animation as being of high quality. For someone even younger than I the quality is higher still with all of the latest computer generated graphics. The point is that my own experiences influenced my expectations about how a movie should be made when it is based on a book, because the technology was available that made much of any story reproducible on the big screen. The second thing I was able to discern in looking back at week three is the importance of the technology in telling the story. When looking back at the earliest cartoons I can now see how the level of technology limited the director's ability to tell a story. These cartoons were only able to tell very superficial stories, about love and romance for example. While love and romance is a complicated topic the cartoons were not able to handle that complexity but rather showed very simple boy meets girl stories. As technology improved it led to better cartoons and more sophisticated stories.

Week four was the first week of the second module where the focus was on 'fidelity to the original'. *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express* really got me to think about director's interpreting a story. At this point, I was already starting to recognize that there are different interpretations of a story but watching both of these movies really highlighted that for me. The fact that these picture books were made into movies brought focus to the topic of interpretation. Simply put there is not enough written material in a picture book to make a full length movie so a director has to interpret the story, they have to flesh out the story and make a movie out of it. As I noted in one of my papers, a picture book tells a story by using the pictures, words and the reader's imagination to create that story. It is a fundamental reason why picture books are so much fun to read over and over again with children; they can make the story change every time. When picture books are made into movies it requires that the director tell the story that he has in his head. He, in a sense, takes on the role of the reader and the movie is his version of the story.

As we finished *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express* I realized these movies were good examples of where the director had to complete the story that was told in the picture books. If he had not then it would not have been a full length movie, so in this instance we do not strictly speaking have high degree of fidelity to the original. As I read and watched *The Wizard of Oz*, *Mary Poppins* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* I realized that these provided different perspectives on the concept of 'fidelity to the original'. With *The Wizard of Oz* book and movie we have a situation where there is not a high degree of fidelity to the original. It is understandable as to why that was the case. The new technology of Technicolor became a big part of the movie experience and the story was also changed to fit the Hollywood formula for success. The role of the Wicked Witch was expanded and the movie ended at a climatic point, which did not match the book. The book had the same climatic point but came back down and then moved on to have another climatic ending. What this showed me is that while I thought a movie had to have a high degree of fidelity to the original to be successful that actually is not the case. Movies can be popular and only be loosely based on the original story. In this case I also feel that while the movie was successful while not having a high degree of fidelity it is very possible that the movie could have followed the book more closely and still have been a success.

While *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express* are examples of movies where a high degree of fidelity is not possible and *The Wizard of Oz* is an example of a movie that does not have a high degree of fidelity but could have, the *Mary Poppins* movie is an example of where it was not possible to have a high degree of fidelity. This is different than the picture books because the *Mary Poppins* movie is of sufficient length to have enough material to make a full length movie it is just that the structure of the story does not translate well onto the big screen. *Mary Poppins*, in a sense, feels like a lot of short stories. Each chapter is very distinct and almost seems to tell its own story unconnected to the other chapters. This type of storyline would be very difficult to make into a movie with a high degree of fidelity. It certainly does not fit the Hollywood formula for success. Therefore it was necessary for the screenwriters to transform the story into one that could be told in a movie. There are significant changes to the story, such as the expansion of Bert the Match Man's role in the story. Bert is throughout the movie but in just one chapter in the book. While the focus in this module was on fidelity to the original, in hindsight I can see the interplay of fidelity and interpretation. Each movie is a director's interpretation of the story and each movie has its own level of fidelity to the original story. Couple this with the level of expectation that an audience will have for a movie based on a book and you have an interesting mix that impacts how a movie turns out. How far astray, from the original, will the director go to tell the story that he wants to tell? How much will the expectations of the book reading audience influence the director's choices and the level of fidelity to the original? These are questions that naturally pose themselves with each book that is turned into a movie.

To close out the module and the concept of fidelity to the original we read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and watched two movies based on that story, we also looked at *The Little Mermaid*. These stories represent opposite ends of the spectrum with regards to fidelity. *The Little Mermaid* was a lot different than the original story and that was because the original contained themes that Disney does not market, pain and death being two of them. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* with Johnny Depp was of higher fidelity than the version with Gene Wilder. These three movies really showed that a director's interpretation of the story makes a difference, especially when a movie is a remake. Was the Johnny Depp movie a reinterpretation of the first movie or an interpretation of the original story? I think it was a new interpretation of the original story, one that was of higher fidelity to the original than the Gene Wilder movie.

The whole second module brought two concepts together for me. One was the focus of the module which was fidelity to the original; the second was the idea that making a good movie can be a counter balance to fidelity. This all relates back to my original expectation that a movie based on a book has to be as close to the original story as possible and that the purpose of making the movie was for it to be produced with that guiding concept in mind. This module showed me that that was not necessary to have a good movie. If a movie was not of high fidelity to the original but it was a good movie then that is justification in and of itself for making the movie. We have to be honest, one of the primary motivations for making a movie is to make a profit and a good movie will make a profit regardless of the degree of fidelity to the original story.

In hindsight the third module and its focus on "Books and Films as Popular Culture" was a natural place for the course to go after the second module. My thinking after the second module was focused on fidelity and good movies. The third module with its focus on the first *Harry Potter* book and movie with its marketing campaign and subsequent transformation of the series into a cultural phenomenon really opened up my mind. My original expectation, that a movie based on a book have a high degree of fidelity, seems so small minded when thinking about the cultural phenomenon J.K. Rowling created with *Harry Potter*. This really could end up being a discussion about entertainment. Reading a book is entertainment as is watching a movie. If you are a *Harry Potter* fan you can also be entertained by the video games, toys and theme parks that are a part of this phenomenon. For many people then this is just about entertainment, but for those of us in the field of education it is about opportunities to learn. Our focus is on the book, we want children to read books. When a movie is made based on a book then that is an opportunity to reinforce the book, to generate interest in the book. Having witnessed what J.K. Rowling has managed to do with her books and consider how widely popular they are, we should be pleased. Her books are popular and they have become even more popular because of the movies, because of the video games and because of everything associated with the *Harry Potter*. Essentially these are all opportunities to get a child back to the source, the book.

What will I do with this knowledge? That is hard to figure out for several reasons. I do not teach, so do not have the opportunity to share this knowledge with children. The program I work for is Head Start, our student population is preschool. Reading *Harry Potter*, *Mary Poppins* or *The Wizard of Oz* is not feasible. However, what is feasible is to work with teachers in my program. I do not intend to set myself up to teach them but rather to develop a small learning community where we can all learn from each other. Essentially, for those teachers that are interested in participating we would meet, offer up topics of interest, decide on what we want to pursue. Once we have a topic, then we can research it, review our findings and discuss ways to incorporate what we have learned into our work. My involvement with this small learning community will help me with my work because it will provide me with a connection to and understanding of my teachers that I have not had in the past.

I can offer up what I have learned in this course as a topic for discussion, and I would do this because I can see this as being a project that can involve parents. Low income families have a different set of priorities than middle income families, who in turn have a different set of priorities from upper income families. This has to be kept in mind, because as teachers and administrators we are coming from a middle income mindset and that does not match a lower income mindset. For example, lower income families place a greater emphasis on entertainment than do middle income families. When I think of children's literature and film I see an opportunity to take advantage of the interest in entertainment to push literacy skill development in preschoolers. If we can create a project that uses entertainment, i.e. movies, to support parents in their role as their children's most valuable teacher then I believe that would be a worthwhile project. We can do this by making connections between books and movies. *The Polar Express* is a fine example. Picture books can be read in the class, we can then involve the parents by having them also read the picture books at home and then provide them with a copy of the movie. This extended learning at home does not end there. We can provide parents with activities that they can do at home to connect the picture book to the movie, to extend the story and engage the children in activities that support literacy. If the parents are supporting what the teachers are doing in the classroom then the children will become stronger readers and better students.

I expect to have support with this project because one of my teachers is working on her Master's degree at Siena Heights University and wants to work with me on a joint project. It will be interesting to hear her thoughts on this idea, because we, as a program, often talk about the parent's role as a teacher in their child's life. However, this idea has the potential to have us become more involved than we have before. We put a lot of effort into informing parents about their role as their child's primary teacher, but this idea could give us the opportunity to really demonstrate it. Feedback from the parents who participate will be important, because it may provide us information on any barriers to participation that may exist and it will also give us feedback on how the parents are interpreting the

material. I have often, in this course, mentioned what my original expectations for books turned into movies were and how they have changed. If this idea is implemented we will have the teachers in the classroom with their interpretations of the story, we will have the parents with their interpretations and, of course, we will have the children with theirs. What should be of particular interest is whether or not a child's interpretation changes based on who is involved. Will children see the story one way at school, because of the influence of the teacher and classmates, and another way at home when they are with their parents?

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