

7.4 Reflecting on Film Fidelity

The movies we watched in this module provided a large variety of interpretations of an original piece of literature. If there was a scale then these movies would occupy different places on that scale. We have *Jumanji*, *The Polar Express*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Mary Poppins*, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and *The Little Mermaid*. One difficulty with rating their fidelity to the original story is that *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express* are both picture books and that anything other than a short film runs the risk of not being highly rated with regards to fidelity to the original. A feature length film needs a lot of material, a big script. A picture book does not provide a lot of material, but it does provide a good story. It is just that they need the reader to complete the story.

Picture books leave the reader and the director of a movie with a lot of room for interpretation because you are dealing with only about 30 or 40 pages of text and pictures. In my reflection paper, for the week on picture books, I wrote that 'reading a picture book means creating a story.' The author provides the text and the pictures but to truly have a complete story part of that story is actually created by the reader; the author in a sense needs the reader of a picture book to complete the story. The director of a movie based on a picture book is then in the role of the reader and the movie becomes his version of the story. It is how he fills in the story to make it complete, how he combines the text and the pictures and creates his own version of the story. So given that the director is free to create the untold part of the story of a picture book I think it is difficult to judge a full length feature film on a fidelity scale with other films that are based on books that contain much more material. And yet having said all of that I would still regard *Jumanji* as one of the movies that had high fidelity to the original story. It seems to me that it is just more important for the director of a movie based on a picture book to stick closely to the original otherwise the risk is that the movie will not resemble the original story. Yes, there is a lot of story to fill in, but with *Jumanji* the director took the significant story points and dialogue from the picture book and made sure they were in the movie. The movie did not start the same as the picture book, because it needed to create a beginning that could be built upon throughout the movie. When the picture book began the director wove that into the movie and it picked up the story right there and continued in essentially the same order but just told the story in a manner that would appeal to modern audiences.

The movie that was least like the original story was *The Little Mermaid* with the other movies landing somewhere in-between on my fidelity scale. There were a lot of difficult topics for Disney to interpret from this story from 1836; topics such as religion and death. There were also scenes that would be disturbing to the

audience that Disney tries to appeal to. Pain and death do not sell well for Disney and they really do not delve into religion because that makes a film less marketable. Due to these difficulties Disney did not include them; instead they took the story of a Mermaid and made it about how love conquers all.

Of the remaining movies I would say that after *Jumanji* we have *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* having a lot of fidelity to the original story. The rest of the movies follow in an order than I could possibly change my mind about; *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Polar Express* and *The Wizard of Oz*. This leaves *Mary Poppins*, while it did have more fidelity to the original than *The Little Mermaid* I would still consider it to be on the low end of the fidelity scale. All the other movies had more fidelity to their original stories.

Is fidelity to the original important? When the course began I would have said yes absolutely. My opinion at the beginning of the course was that if you were going to make a movie based on a book then you needed to use as much dialogue as possible, follow the sequence of events in the book and also use all the significant plot points as much as possible. I did recognize that the detail in a lengthy novel would be hard duplicate on film, but I still felt that that was the only way to make a movie. It had to be the book coming to life; it had to be the story that I had in my head as I read the book and the only way to do that was to produce a film with a high degree of fidelity to the original. It could not be any other way.

I am no longer wedded to such a strong position with regards to the fidelity of a movie to the original story. Differing levels of fidelity really represent different interpretations of the story. I really felt that *The Wizard of Oz* movie was close in spirit to the book but at the same time was one of the books that held the least amount of fidelity to the original book. This was because many chapters at the end of the book were not included in the book and the Wicked Witch of the West, for one, was given an expanded role in the movie. Why have I changed my mind? Movies are different than books, their appeal is different, and their approach is different. Movies take less time to watch than books take to read (except picture books). It is a visual medium that rushes over you all at once, whereas a book gives you the story at a much slower pace and I for one find that I reread passages if my mind has wandered. I am not sure my mind every wanders in a movie, because of the pace, and if it did then I would not be able to go back over a scene that I was not paying attention to (until the movie comes out on DVD). Movies have to be watched over again to gain deeper meaning and understanding. Sometimes they can be watched too many times with over analysis being the result. Books are also read over again with some deeper understanding of the material being a result, but it is much more likely for a movie to be watched 20 times than for a book to be read 20 times. Looking at *The Wizard of Oz* again, for me it is a puzzle as to why chapters were left out of the story. I honestly think that including the missing seven chapters would have

added greatly to the movie. It would have brought a higher degree of fidelity to the original story and also made a better movie.

Mary Poppins, on the other hand, is a movie where I understand why the director did not follow the story closely. The book felt like a series of short stories and I think that would have been hard to turn that into a cohesive narrative for the scriptwriters, especially since the movie was a musical. There were also a number of topics that would have been less than appealing for audiences in the 60's; topics, such as, some of the racial and ethnic overtones to the book, probably quite commonplace and acceptable when the book was written, but no longer acceptable nor easily covered in the 60's or today. Also the book was set in the 30's and that would have been too drab and dreary. Moving the setting to 1910's made the movie more appealing.

As I indicated earlier fidelity to the original was very important to me when I began this course. It was how I thought movies based on books should be made. However, the books and movies we have read and seen have shown me that fidelity to the original is not the be all and end all of a movie. Movies, as I have truly discovered, are their own interpretations of the original story. As we bring our own interpretations of a story to the picture book, directors bring their own interpretation to the story via the movie. It is even possible to have different interpretations of the same original story, as we saw with the book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In this situation, at least in my opinion, we saw the reinterpretation of this story, in the second movie with Johnny Depp, actually end up having more fidelity to the original than the first interpretation, years earlier, with Gene Wilder.

So where does this place the issue of fidelity? How important is it? It depends on how well the story is told. In other words, it depends on how good the movie is. What is important here is that a good movie is made. If it is good then it will be accepted regardless of how much fidelity to the original story it maintains. It is almost an ends justify the means situation. If the movie is good, then it will be accepted as a fine interpretation of the story irregardless of how close the movie is to the story. If the movie is poorly made, poorly received or just not a commercial success then the critics of the movie will use the issue of fidelity as one reason why the movie was unsuccessful. Movies move away from a close fidelity to the original when the director, and the decision makers at the movie studios, feel that the profitability of the movie can be improved by making changes. *Mary Poppins*, on the low end of the fidelity scale, had to be changed to make the movie a commercial success. I just do not see how a good script for a movie could have come from what seems like a jumble of short stories. *Jumanji*, on the high end of the fidelity scale, was close to the original picture book and was a success because of that; even though a lot was added to the story to make it a full length feature film. We must remember that that was done because the original was a picture book. In both cases we have successful

movies and I do not recall any critics hammering either movie with the issue of fidelity to the original story.

I began the course with the expectation that for movies based on a book or picture book that it had to be as close as possible to the original story. I now recognize that movies are interpretations of those original stories and that for the movie to be made there has to be an expectation that the movie will be profitable. It is also possible that stories can be interpreted and reinterpreted, as we saw with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and both interpretations can be profitable. A movie would not be remade if the studio did not believe they would make a profit. As a viewer of movies my hope is that the highest possible fidelity to the original be maintained. I enjoy recognizing dialogue and plot points from the story and also how the director used that language from the book, that plot point to make the connection to the original story. It cannot be said that the highest fidelity to the original will automatically make the movie better, it just happens to be that that is my desire when I see a movie based on a book.