

REFLECTION TO FIDELITY TO THE ORIGINAL

What is fidelity to the original in terms of films based off literature? Is there such a thing as too much or too little fidelity? When is a filmmaker's perspective too influential? All of these questions were addressed during Module Two where we discussed and analyzed fidelity to the original with the movies and book versions of *The Polar Express*, *Jumanji*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Mary Poppins*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and *The Little Mermaid*. While reading and watching the stories, I realized that there are varying degrees of faithfulness that the movies should have to the original. Sometimes fidelity to the original can be both good and bad depending on the style of the original story and the filmmaker's intentions. However there are some complications that can occur when there are different artists retelling or interpreting another artist's work.

When a book or story is turned into a film, there are different ways that the movie can remain faithful to the original, such as keeping characters, plot, theme, style, and setting consistent. However, it is not very often that all five elements are kept the same throughout the whole film. When a filmmaker creates a movie from a book, the story is told through a new perspective. It is up to the filmmaker to decide the intent of the film and how much fidelity the filmmaker wants to the original. Depending on what type of story the filmmaker chooses to recreate determines the elements of fidelity in the film.

Picture books that are made into films have little faithfulness due to the lack of material that is in the original. Filmmakers have to supplement material and add more to the plot and characters in order to make the story the length of a movie and to keep audiences engaged. For example, *The Polar Express* kept the overall theme of the book consistent within the movie, but added more characters and adventures to the plot in order to make the film longer and more entertaining for audiences. Also, *Jumanji* did a similar thing where the filmmakers kept the basis of the film the same, but added a new main character and background story, along with more adventure to appeal to more audiences. Filmmakers of picture books have to keep in mind what is important in the original and what elements can be changed. This determines the elements of fidelity to the original and the new perspective of the filmmaker.

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There are some cases where the film version of a book is much more popular than the original written version. When this happens, very few people are concerned with fidelity to the original. One example of this is the classic movie *Mary Poppins*, where everyone at least knows of the film and has probably seen it numerous times. Personally, I did not know that a book of *Mary Poppins* even existed, and when I talked to others, very few of them realized there was a book version! Another example of this is *The Wizard of Oz*, in which I knew there was a book version, but had little desire to read it, because I loved the movie. When I read the book, I was deeply disappointed, because I felt it was too long and the movie was much more concise and easy to watch. Everyone knows of *The Wizard of Oz* and the movie is a classic in its own right, but the book did not live up to the film version. In this case there is sometimes little fidelity to the original when a movie becomes better known than the book version, and viewers and readers seem less concerned with fidelity to the original when this happens.

Another type of issue that can arise with faithfulness to the written form is when a book is made into a movie twice. When this happens there are various interpretations that are expressed from the original source, which can make fidelity difficult to examine without confusing it with the other movie. An example of this is with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* with the 1971 version and the 2005 version of the story. The older film is a childhood favorite for most, however while I was reading the book, I felt that the 2005 film had the most fidelity. The two filmmakers differed on their interpretation of Willy Wonka based on their portrayal of the character, in which in the older film his character was darker with dry humor, and in the newer version he was eccentric, witty, and insecure. When two films are made from a written version there is one artist interpreting the author's work, and in the second film the artist is interpreting the original and first version's work. This can make it difficult to look at fidelity, because while I was reading I was getting confused as to what elements were similar and different with the characters and plot between each movie. Interpretation and reinterpretation of written work can make it difficult to maintain fidelity, but I felt that the filmmaker's did add some fidelity, with some twists to the movies to make the movie more entertaining for audiences, despite the controversial elements of the original story.

The last type of fidelity we examined during the module was the "Disney magic" that occurs when Disney decides to create a film from an old piece of literature. One example of this is *The Little Mermaid*, where Disney turned the original tragedy into a "happily ever after" like most of their other

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films. The film had little fidelity to the original in the way that it illustrated the characters, was less violent, incorporated songs, and ended happily with the prince and princess getting married. Disney completely changed the theme, plot, and characters, but kept the basics the same, in which it was a movie about a mermaid enthralled with life above the sea. Disney created the film with intentions of it appealing to young children, which is why they had to turn the story from a tragedy to a happy ending. The film was Disney's interpretation of the original story and Disney's perspective of the story differed from the written form as a way to make the film more entertaining and engaging for young audiences. Each of the films that we examined in class had varying degrees of fidelity to the original, and very few kept the theme, plot, characters, setting, and style consistent with the written version of the story.

In the past when I would see a movie that was based off a book, I always walked away disappointed in how different the film version was to the original story. I used to have the expectation that when I saw a movie made from a book that it had to be identical to the original story and anything that was changed or missing, I would be extremely frustrated. However, after participating in the activities from the module, I realize that fidelity to the original is not the only thing that matters and has little importance in the film. I believe that there needs to be a degree of fidelity such as keeping some basic elements consistent with the original story, because if you change everything completely, is it really the same story? It is important to keep what is important to the story, which is at the filmmaker's discretion. I do not think that the film version of *The Little Mermaid* had much fidelity to the original, in which I'm not sure that it should have been titled the same. However, if there are changes in characters and setting, or the plot, then that is the new perspective of the story. The film version is a new view and twist on the written version. There has to be obvious changes to the original in order for the story to appeal to moviegoers and the targeted audience. Filmmakers decide to make a film that others will enjoy and relate to the characters that they see on the screen. Fidelity is not always necessary when a movie is being made for entertainment purposes to draw audiences.

Another reason that fidelity is not completely important is the fact that the film is a new perspective and influence of the original. The original should serve as a basis for a new artist's interpretation. It is the equivalent of musicians remaking or remixing classic songs from the past—they have similar words, but the style and beat may be completely different. When a person reads a story, they take away something different and may imagine it differently in their heads. When I taught

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visualization to first graders, I explained that we may gather similar pictures from the words that we read, but the details may vary. Individuals read books and pick out different parts of the book in different ways, which is what the filmmakers do when they create the story for the screen. This is why that the two film versions of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* differed greatly. The two filmmakers had different perspectives and were influenced in different parts of the story. There were obvious differences such as the modernized technology that was used in the newer version, but the characters and family portrayals were slightly different from each other. Both the films included controversial elements in the stereotypes of the adults and children, but those were faithful to the original text by Roald Dahl. The new artist's perspective is another reason why fidelity is not entirely important when a filmmaker is creating a movie from a book.

The third reason why I believe fidelity is not all that matters when a story is turned into film is because it would get boring if everything was kept exactly the same. Going to see the movie would be visually stimulating, but there would be no surprises or twists, which is what makes a story fun to read and watch. Even though the film versions of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* seemed to have the most fidelity (in my opinion), there were still elements that were a surprise. For example, both movies included the fake ticket winner, the older version had the golden geese, and the newer version had the background story of Willy Wonka's childhood and family life. Each of these changes provided a new twist for the audience and made them question what might happen or if there would ultimately have the same ending. Each film had a different theme where the original focused on hope, the first film focused on family, and the second film focused on dreams. However, the differences in themes were not entirely drastic and still kept elements of the story the same as the written version. It is important that films maintain some fidelity in order to keep the story recognizable to the audience, but it is not the sole importance to a film. When a book is turned into a film it doesn't have to be 100 percent faithful to the original, because there is the entertainment factor, filmmaker's perspective and intent, and the element of surprise that makes people want to read and watch a story.

Despite the reasons to stray from fidelity, there are some issues that complicate the stance of strict fidelity. If a film differs too much from the original, should it really be titled the same as the original piece of writing? *The Little Mermaid* is an example of this, in which the very basic idea was kept consistent; however everything else differed from the written version. I do not know the legalities of

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what goes into giving a movie a title and what happens when a book is turned into a film, but there should be a point when the filmmaker realizes that they have created a completely different story. If significant changes elements are changed drastically, such as characters, plot, and setting, from the original form, then it is not the same story. Even though the movie version of *Jumanji* changed the characters and theme, it did not drastically change the outcome of the story. Also, since the original was a picture book, changes and additions needed to be made in order to fill the space of the film. Another movie that had little fidelity was *The Wizard of Oz*. However, the degree of fidelity to the original in this film was different, because the original was too long and the filmmaker needed to delete scenes and parts from the book in order to keep the story concise and entertaining. The movie strayed from the original, but it did have major elements of fidelity to the original with the characters and ending of the story. Fidelity to the original is important to have as a basis to create a film and the infidelities should not change the entire story, in which it is no longer recognizable to the original story.

Creating a film from a book or piece of literature is difficult where there is a fine line when it comes to fidelity to the original. There are varying degrees in which films should have fidelity and infidelity, but there are also issues that surround strict fidelity. Overall, it is important to note that each story, whether it is the film or the original written version, is through the perspective of a different artist. No two artists are the same and they will not create the exact same piece of work. Even though they don't create the same work, would we, as the audience, be happy that they did create the same piece of work by having fidelity? There would be a level of disappointment if everything was kept exactly the same and there was nothing new to take from a favorite story.