

5.3 Reflection on Cultural Appropriation of Literature and Films

With the many children's books and their film versions we have read, I felt as though there was a somewhat equal balance between the popularity of each form. With Charlotte's Web, I was especially familiar with both the text and film versions and use them frequently when comparing similarities and differences with my students. I also enjoyed the comparisons we made with technology through The Polar Express and Jumanji in the previous weeks. I felt that with Jumanji, the book was more popular and with The Polar Express, both versions were equally loved by children and families. The look at how technology through the years have progressed in animation and film has also helped me take a much deeper interest in the special effects and filming techniques used in The Wizard of Oz. I feel that Jerry Griswold's article was very helpful in allowing me to further my perspectives on the different interpretations and how the book and film version of The Wizard of Oz differed.

What I considered immediately with the book and film version of The Wizard of Oz was that I have never read Frank L. Baum's original text until now and recently only knew the film version. I had to ask myself many times while reflecting and writing, why I had never been exposed to Baum's literary work before. With The Wizard of Oz, it seems as though being published over 100 years ago and the reality of the entertainment world has created favoritism towards Victor Flemming's film version. Since the early start of animation in the 1900's, it seems as though film has become a better growing source for entertainment and that it is able to do many things that literature used to provide. With this being said, it is no surprise to me that there is a trend of movies being more popular than the book in which it is based on.

With movies such as The Wizard of Oz, we can not deny the fact that Flemming's film version is more famous than Baum's original text. We can see evidence of this in the National Museum of American History with its advertisements in 2009 of Dorothy's red slippers being the center of attention. When a film becomes more popular than its original book, it seems as though society completely forgets about where its origins came from. With its extreme popularity we forget about its birth from a book and only focus on the value the film has on society. I wonder why our society with all of its value on education and scholarly aptitude, hasn't pushed the teachings of great children's literature, beyond what is on the movie screen. I feel like a victim of the popularity of these kinds of movies, because I was never exposed to texts like Baum's. When we forget about an original book that has become a movie, we forget about where it all began. We then lose the value that literature used to have with our society. The birth place of films like The Wizard of Oz now sit and wait on a bookshelf to be dusted off periodically by a curious reader.

With The Wizard of Oz, many other offsprings have occurred though music, the theater, and merchandise. Unfortunately many of the new take-offs of Oz are based upon the film version and not the book. What should happen through these spin offs, is a mention or dedication to its original text that is the cause of all this great commotion. I would not be opposed to creating a clause in the entertainment world that would make it required to reference its original book version so the audience could be aware of it. When films like this come to popularity, society should dust off its book and display them proudly for people to see. We often see this done with Harry Potter books, so why

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not much older literature? There is no harm in exposing younger generations to classic American literature, and I wish that something of this sort could've been done for me. If we make it known that there is a book version from long ago for such popular movies, we could be amazed at the amount of interest we could cause in young adults and children with literature again. Films like *Beowulf* were a hit with certain audiences, but I wonder how many of them knew that it was an epic heroic poem dated from between the 8th and 11th century? It is knowledge through the exposure to both the text and film that will allow us to focus on more than just the silver screen.

With the popularity of films over the books, like *Wizard of Oz*, the amount of merchandise and pop-culture spin-offs are everywhere! It is no longer only about the integrity and meaning behind the film, but now it seems to be all about how much money you can make. With Disney movies this is especially true since part of their marketing strategies of a children's movie like *The Frog Princess*, is the marketing of things like lunch boxes, clothes, dolls, toys, coloring books etc... The amount of merchandise created for a film is immense and still over 60 years later, you can go to MGM studios and buy *Wizard of Oz* mugs, shirts, posters, and other memorabilia. I think the most powerful evidence of how pop-culture plays a significant role in our history is the National Treasure of Popular Culture Exhibit at the National Museum of American History. They describe this exhibit, which includes Dorothy's ruby slippers, as "playing major roles in American life, shaping our national memory and often defining what is American to the nation and to the world. The infinite variety of popular culture offers a democracy of choices," (*Smithsonian*). This is a pretty powerful statement for a pair of slippers that came from a movie!

I don't disagree with the fact that pop-culture is a shaping attribute to America, but through this week I felt a bit differently about how blinding it can be as well. I loved the exhibit at the Smithsonian where I could view Dorothy's red slippers and took many pictures next to the case. Yet, I feel as though I looked naïve standing at the exhibit and not even knowing about Baum's original book. Since I was never exposed to *The Wizard of Oz*, the book, I feel very little connection to Baum's story and feel as though the film came first. I know in actuality that the book was written many years before the film, but the lack of knowledge about it has created a strong sense of detachment. Reading the book felt very strange to me as I compared it to the film that is so prominent in American culture. It was as if I was reading someone else's thoughts and interpretation of the film, instead of vice versa. It saddens me that I have really no attachment to the book and that there is still so much I don't know about where this story came from. Fortunately, I take this dose of pop-culture reality as an awakening and no longer want to be so naïve to a film's roots.

It's a difficult relationship between books and their films and I continue to find my opinion about the fidelity to the original changing each unit. I know that I had stated in my reflection about *The Polar Express* and *Jumanji*, that there seems to be very little commitment in keeping fidelity to the original. I still feel that many filmmakers do not always see the important of creating a movie that keeps to the text of a children's book. Yet, what has changed for me is that if a film is only loosely based on an original text, than the words "loosely" should appear on its advertisements. It seems like thievery and

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trickery to pretend that movies, which have very loose ties to their book, can even be advertised as based on its original text. I believe my feelings of frustration about the fidelity to the original comes from my disappointment of not knowing about Baum's The Wizard of Oz. I appreciate now all of the elements that are similar between the two and feel more comfortable in understanding the reasons behind what is omitted. Yet, I still don't think that it's fair to only expose the audience to one version of the story and still be able to have the same title as the text. I very much appreciate and love the classic films "based" on children's books, but wish that something more could be done to expose that targeted audience to *all* or its original text.

Smithsonian quote resource:

1. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibition.cfm?key=38&exkey=1199>