

Reflections on Film Fidelity

Fidelity – according to Merriam-Webster Online – is defined as the state or quality of being faithful. This faithfulness in a film adaptation of a picture book or novel can be seen in how closely the story and characters on screen mirror the way they are written in text. Before this class, my belief on a film's fidelity was entirely wrapped up in this definition. To truly sync with the text, a film had to literally transfer everything within the writing that could be translated and place it in the movie.

Looking at these films with a more critical lens, however, has broadened my perspective on exactly what it means for a motion picture to show fidelity. Discussions with classmates have contributed to my growth in being able to “read” a film. Articles read have helped me to show the struggles that go into adjusting a book into a film. My own observations have led me to a consensus: a movie is allowed certain liberties when it is converting a picture book or text into a feature film.

My new found belief in fidelity lends itself to a question. What (and how many) liberties can the film industry take when adapting a text and still claim fidelity? The focus of my reflection will be addressing this issue. To help illustrate my points, I will be using Roald Dahl's beloved (and criticized) novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; furthermore, my focus will be on both the 1971 film *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* – featuring Gene Wilder - and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the 2005 version starring Johnny Depp, directed by Tim Burton. Before I can state my position on which version showed more fidelity to the novel, I am going to write about how each of them – 1971 and 2005 – displayed elements of fidelity. Inversely, I will explore how they strayed from the original text as well.

Filmed in 1971, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* showed fidelity to the book in numerous ways. Compared to the 2005 version (which I will discuss further into this reflection), Gene Wilder's portrayal of Willy Wonka was more in tune with the novel. Wonka was a fancy, brilliant, and eloquent speaker in the novel, and Wilder's acting was very similar. In particular, the film captured Willy Wonka's passion and excitement about the world he created.

The film's plot also remained relatively close to the original. The core of the story was still about Charlie, a child dealing with poverty who still manages to be a kind, caring, and virtuous young man. The story still features a group of children who are physical manifestations of vices (greed, gluttony, envy, and sloth), and experience a consequence for their wicked ways. Willy Wonka still became withdrawn due to people trying to steal his creations; the subsequent effect is that he hires the Oompa-Loompas. The resolution remains the same: Charlie, by virtue of being honest and noble, inherits the Wonka Chocolate Factory.

While relatively close to the original, the film does take certain creative liberties. There were three examples I feel best exemplify these liberties. One of the first is the film's decision to include an example of Charlie and Grandpa Joe breaking the rules by drinking the elixir. I feel this was done to create suspension with the viewers, since not only even pious Charlie was capable of following all of the rules. More importantly, it would create suspense for those watching the movie who had previously read the novel. Would it cost him a chance at the factory? Coincidentally, the inclusion of Mr. Wilkinson – who continually tests Charlie's moral

fiber throughout the film – was created for the purpose of creating suspense on the protagonist’s character.

Another liberty taken by the 1971 film version was the re-imagining of the Oompa-Loompas. The original text’s description of these characters, written in 1964, was a source of controversy and discussion. Many felt that their appearance and depiction (which were taken to be a thinly portrayed take on the tribes found in Africa) were inherently racist. Though he claimed no malice, Dahl still took the criticism to heart, and eventually apologized. It is my assertion that the film chose to make the Oompa-Loompas different to avoid any negative feedback, and to somewhat distance itself from the situation all together.

The last liberty I took notice of was the exclusion of Charlie’s father, Mr. Bucket. In the book, he is a loving, supportive father and husband. Despite overwhelming odds – caring and providing for six other people, then having to make ends meet when he loses his job – Mr. Bucket is the definition of a strong father figure for Charlie. In the movie, this element is glaringly absent. Charlie is inherently the main source of income for his family. It is his job which pays for the bread on the table. The decision to remove Mr. Bucket’s role in the adaptation could have been done to create even more sympathy for Charlie. The fact that he also shares his earnings with his mother and grandparents also drives home the idea that he is truly a boy of great values.

The 2005 version of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* retains many comparable qualities to the original text, while offering contrasting elements as well. Much like the 1971 film that precedes it, the 2005 version features the plot outline found in the text; the characters (including Mr. Bucket) and setting found in the novel also remain unscathed in the remake. The film also modifies the appearance of the Oompa-Loompas – again, I feel this was done to avoid any sort of backlash about inappropriate racial undertones.

When reviewing the film, there was one distinct creative difference to the movie that made me take notice. One was the sudden inclusion of Willy Wonka’s father, and how this dynamic shaped him as he became an adult. Unlike Wilder’s more charming and charismatic interpretation of Wonka, Johnny Depp’s take on the role is more introverted and disturbed. His social awkwardness can be shown on his need to use index card to elaborate points; it is very reminiscent of a role Depp played years early, *Edward Scissorhands* (also directed by Burton).

While trying to gather insight into my reflection, I happened upon a great article by Laura Casper-Teague, entitled “Copycats or the Real Deal, What’s Your Preference?” In this interesting piece on fidelity, I found a particular passage that really resonated with my views on Depp’s version of the candy icon: “The focus of the 2005 film is more on Wonka’s personal growth and healing from a psychological point of view.” I found myself agreeing – the film’s emphasis was just as much on the plight of Charlie as it was on addressing the issues faced by Wonka.

To my surprise, I found the 2005 film to show more fidelity than the 1973 version. I say surprised, because when I was reviewing my notes on the films, I pointed out more creative differences in Tim Burton’s adaptation! I found his take on Dahl’s classic to be more edgy than the text (especially Mike Teavee, who comes across as a young sociopath). I also found the Oompa-Loompas disturbing, and the dialogue full of many references to things found other

forms of media. Aside from giving Wonka a back story, the film also drastically changed the falling action of the story when Charlie initially refuses to join Willy Wonka after he refuses to allow Charlie's family to live in the factory.

Despite all of these differences, I felt it was a more in line with the novel (and more enjoyable). This was due to fact that, while it retained many of the qualities of the original – especially the darker tones, and views on modern children – it found ways to add imaginative characters and scenes to the movie. Instead of being a by-the-number take on the children's book, Tim Burton went out of his way to present his own spin on the tale. It reminded me of reading about how Baum thought of *The Wizard of Oz*: a story that was open for interpretation.

From these past few weeks, I have experienced a shift in my thinking about a film's fidelity a book or novel. I have begun to see that there are times when a film needs to add additional storylines to create a stronger plot structure (especially with picture books, which feature little dialogue). Fidelity to an original text does not need to be verbatim. Rather, it is the films which capture the essence of the text, along with adding new and exciting characters and plot devices that maintain strong ties to the original.