Laura Brouse

Dr. Anna Redcay

ENGLIT 0354

11 December 2012

Does the Silver Screen do Harry Potter Justice?

The Harry Potter series became the cultural icon of today’s teenage/young adult generation. First published in the UK in June 1997, the US corporation Scholastic soon bought the rights for publishing in America. The first American version was published in October 1998. The only minor change made to the book was the replacement of the word “philosopher” with the word “sorcerer” in the title and throughout the book. In only a little less than a year, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone had made the New York Time’s Bestsellers List. J.K. Rowling continued to produce new novels, receiving awards and honors for every single one. In November 2001, the first novel was transformed into a movie and released into theaters. Directed by Chris Columbus, it was clear that this series would sell itself. Many critics and avid Harry Potter fans have been debating this question for a while: Has the movie stayed true to the novel, or were there too many differences? Through emphasizing the naivety and new experiences/friendships Harry gains during his first year at Hogwarts, the movie stays true to the novel while tailoring the written work to fit the silver screen.

There are many different ways a written work can be turned into an adaptation such as a screenplay. There is a transposition, which is when the novel is directly given on the screen with little to no change from the original version. Then there is a commentary, when an original story is taken and changed in some respect (whether it be accidentally or on purpose). Lastly, there is an analogy, which is a considerable departure from the original for the sake of making another work of art. But can there really be transposition? It is the same concept as symmetry in a picture book. Readers try to examine the relationship between pictures and words instead of analyzing the pictures and words separately. Because of cultural connotations, we as readers all see something different in the text or pictures. One example we discussed in class was when researchers showed the same picture to a group of Americans and to a group of Africans. The Americans saw the picture as a woman sitting in front of a window, while the Africans saw a woman with a basket on her head. The basket version is more likely to be seen in the African culture because that is how they carry items, like laundry or food, around. Seeing a woman in front of a window is unlikely to be seen by the African people because being indoors is not a definite part of their culture. All the same, two readers will never take away the same exact interpretation of a scene or book. David Lewis explains this on page 39 of his book, *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*: “If the two parts of the text appear to be saying the same thing then there would appear to be no interaction to examine. The pictures and words would simply be running on parallel tracks.” For this reason, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s stone (the movie) is not an exact transposition of the original novel.

In the movie, there is a lot of interanimation. One would not think that is true because it has only been discussed it as part of a book. But if interanimation is where words and images influence one another, why can’t moving images and dialogue influence each other as well? Looking at a picture can create a different definition than reading a definition or some sort of text that can create an individual visualization inside a reader’s head. The same goes for movies; watching the movie on mute, a watcher can gather the same main ideas but doesn’t understand all of the complete and smaller details. Just listening to dialogue can do the opposite; a listener can get all of the details but has to visualize the characters, the scenes, and the situations. According to Lewis, words and images need each other to properly serve their function. “The image can only live and have meaning as part of the picturebook when informed…” (Lewis 35). Here Lewis explains that the image can only be what it is because of its interaction with the words. This is true with movies in two different ways. First, it can be between the novel and the movie. In Harry Potter’s case, the movie would not have been an idea in Chris Columbus’s mind without the novel being written. But the relationship of interanimation between words and images in a movie can also be between visual scenes and spoken dialogue, like stated in an earlier example (watching the movie on mute, or with just sound and not watching the visual scenes). The interanimation in Harry Potter is especially important because it’s the beginning part of a series; it is especially important to learn the back-story details before continuing on to the following movies (or books) in the series.

There are many differences between the Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone novel and movie. In the beginning of the book, J.K. Rowling spends a lot of time (four chapters, or about 60 pages) building up the misery of Harry’s life with the Dursleys. Yet in the movie, only about half an hour is spent on Harry’s life with the Dursleys, and much is cut out. One would wonder, why is this movie considered a good representation of the novel if so much is left out? One benefit of visual scenes is that the visual scenes can describe a lot of what three pages of written narration would explain in a five second glance, the scenes are then able to be cut much shorter.

A great example of this difference between the novel and the motion picture is the Hogwarts Express scene. In the book, much page space is spent developing the conversation between Harry and Ron, but also individual thoughts and side narration. The novel contains a large discussion between Harry and Ron about Voldemort and how Harry is not afraid to say his name. In the movie, this extra dialogue proves unnecessary when Ron asks Harry if his scar is real, and Harry simply shows him. In the book, Harry comforts an embarrassed Ron with stories of how he had hand-me-downs and no money when he lived with the Dursleys to make Ron feel better about his family not being well off. In the movie, there is more emphasis on the sweets scene, where Harry and Ron’s camaraderie is built more around the boys sharing the sweets and Ron explaining all of the different products and their magical tendencies to Harry. Another difference in the scene is the appearance of Hermione Granger. In the movie, she enters Harry and Ron’s train compartment originally looking for Neville’s toad, sees Ron doing magic, and ends up fixing Harry’s glasses. In the book, she constantly rambles about how she read about Harry in different textbooks and wants to be sorted into Gryffindor, etc. She comes off as more bossy in the movie than she does in the book. In the book, she comes off as a more of a nerdy, geeky type. The big difference in this scene is the shortened length of the scene in the movie. Besides the sharing of the sweets, the producers can show the blossoming friendship of Harry and Ron and help them express what they’re thinking (without narration) with them exchanging glances during Hermione’s intrusion. These exchanges allow the viewers to feel as if they are teaming up against Hermione together. Shortening scenes like this make room for later in the film to elongate scenes that require a lot of detail or magical action.

The real question is: does the film remain faithful to the novel? In the beginning, it is hard to argue this point to be true. The producers were faced with a tough decision right in the opening sequence. How are narrated details or physical characteristics depicted in a movie without a narrator physically reading the words? The movie makers must take this description and turn it into a physically viewable scene; descriptions such as the one on the first page of chapter one in the novel. “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn’t hold with such nonsense” (Rowling 1). In the movie, this description must be turned into something visible so the viewer can get the same feel as the reader does when reading that opening paragraph. The movie accomplishes this by presenting a perfect house with a manicured lawn and garden on a boring, not heavily occupied street. In some parts, the directors had to take silent, narrated thoughts and turn them into dialogue to get the point across to the viewers. A good example of this is the Sorting Hat scene. In the novel, the dialogue in this scene takes place strictly between Harry and the Sorting Hat (the hat speaks into Harry’s ear). Yet, in the movie, the hat speaks out loud for the entire Great Hall to hear whatever he is saying about the person who adorns it. But, through all of the dialogue and narration cuts, I strongly believe the movie still stays very true to the novel. The main idea of the novel is to understand the back story behind Harry’s arrival at the Dursleys’ and his initial trip to Hogwarts, and the movie lives up to those exact expectations. While the novel definitely has a darker, more vulnerable tone to it, the main idea is still accomplished while completely immersing the viewer into the magical world of Hogwarts. It may even be better than the novel.

Why go as far as argue that the movie is better? Most people who believe it’s a good adaptation of the novel would argue this point. Seeing the magic unfold in front of your eyes is a lot easier than trying to visualize everything happening while reading it. Watching magic happen makes it so much easier to get completely caught up in the world of magic. Everyone who was a Harry Potter fan in his or her youth secretly awaited the arrival of his or her own Hogwarts letter. Making the movies made the magical aspect of the Harry Potter world seem so much more real. Because the concept in the original books is so abnormal and abstract, it is hard for some people to visualize, or even believe, what’s going on while they are reading it, and the movies help with that difficulty.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone was one of the most successful stories of adaptations. Not every novel-turned-movie ends up being a great remake. With the constant involvement of the author J.K. Rowling, the producers were able to accurately do the series justice and create a magical world that so many people remain engrossed in to this day. The new Pottermore site is helping serious Harry Potter fans feed their addiction. Pottermore is yet another adaptation of the series where a user can read behind-the-scenes and extra text excerpts from J.K. Rowling, and also participate in fun activities like going shopping in Diagon Alley or getting sorted into a specific House. While only the Sorcerer’s Stone and the Chamber of Secrets are available in the Pottermore realm, the reader can still engage in many activities and read plenty of background information and side stories to quench their thirst for Harry Potter knowledge. With directors focused on keeping the important elements and themes true to the book, the Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone feature film is a very strong adaptation of the original novel.

Works Cited

Lewis, David. "The Interaction of Word and Image in Picturebooks."*Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*.” N.p.: n.p., n.d. 31-45. Print.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic, 1998. Print. Harry Potter.