Stephanie Lee, 3.3 Reflection on PB and Films

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As a student of children's literature, I "read" a picture book and the film version of a picture book much more closely now that I have learned the appropriate literary and film language to discuss various aspects. The text of picture book is expanded hundred of times over in order to extend the screenplay to nearly two hours. When a picture book is turned into a film, it seems that only the beginning and the ending events stay in tact. If the set up and conclusion of the story are consistent with the text, the story itself maintains its framework events.

Nevertheless, so much of the written text was changed in the film version of *The Polar Express* that it seems like a new story entirely. Perhaps, only the framework ideas of a boy's Christmas Eve and a train called the Polar Express were precise. Firstly, the boy is never named in neither the book nor the film; however, the credits call the boy "Hero Boy." Why was he a hero? Did Chris Van Allsburg consider him a hero in the picture book? Similarly, the inclusion of the boy's train pal, called "Hero Girl" in the credits, is equally ambiguously named. Why was the young lad, Billy, the only named child on the train? This delineation of character is distinctive as the main characters are not named and a minor character is. Moreover, when the boy battles a snowstorm on top of the moving train, he meets a crazed vagabond who claims to be the "King of the North Pole." With a campfire, slurred speech, and coffee, the viewer must figure out that this eerie man is actually a ghost. It is unclear which part of the book this embellishes. It is stretch to connect the boy's interactions with the "Hobo" character, as named in the credits, to the spirit of Christmas and belief in Santa Claus.

In *The Polar Express*, the setting changes constantly as nearly every other scene is placed elsewhere. Perhaps this is one advantage to computer-generated imaging; however, for the viewer, it can be overwhelming. The protracted sequence of shots following the continuous flight of the flying ticket is one example of the infinite number of settings possible through computerized film. As the boy loses the girl's ticket, the ticket sweeps through a wolf pack, between mountains, into a bird nest, and finally gets caught in the train car vent gate. This implausible succession of events defies both logic and physics adding a somewhat magical element to the film.

The Polar Express train arrives outside his house and the film's lighting is instantaneously bright. The illuminated scene nearly confuses night with day if not for the pajamas. The rays of light form the train are overbearing which almost alludes to a religious experience. The boy needs convincing from the conductor to climb on board as he is deemed a non-believer. Believing in Christmas is the theme of the film and the book. The events that transpire in the film are unlike the book as the boy and the viewer are already made aware of the hole in the boy's pocket when the conductor checks for tickets. This totally spoils the surprising event in book. Later, when the boy receives the silver bell from Santa Claus, all the viewer can think is, "How foolish. You already knew about that hole in your pocket!"

The style of both films was rather wild as havoc filled Jumanji and continual movement made up *The Polar Express*. In one particular scene in *The Polar Express*, the train was so poorly designed that one misstep of the boy stepping into the train caused the

entire train car to detach and take off in total chaos. There are point of view shots and movement shots as the children tumble into Santa's factory. They follow the sound of a bell and take seat in a tube car, which launches them into a scene reminiscent to *Star Wars* when Luke Skywalker flies the X-Wing into space. This X-wing like perspective momentarily transforms the setting into space, potentially signifying that the North Pole is likened to another planet. Whether or not the Luke Skywalker reference was intention would be a good research topic to investigate further.

In the film, *Jumanji*, there is an overt amount of visual and auditory effects used to enhance the film. Visually, the wild animals are graphically drawn into the scenes to interact with the human actors. The final result of the sound editing quite evidently included spot effects, music, pitch, timbre, acoustic, and volume. There was incessant screaming. Seemingly ever other scene featured one or more of the characters screaming. Between these scenes were rumbling noises anticipating suspense and heightening the pace of the subsequent full-action sequence. Most of the camera shots were wider in angle or from high or low angles. Because there was physically so much to show in one frame, the filmmakers were forced to make the shots wider. Only a few shots were close-ups such as the big spider toward the end of the movie. The rhythm of the scenes was dependent on the sound level. The loudness was erratic as the destruction, chases, and screaming were blaring, and the dialogue was hard to hear. I had to continually turn the volume up and down in order to make the sound manageable.

When transformed into film, the picture book illustrations are animated and embellished. *The Polar Express*, for instance, includes the rendition of a refreshments song and dance where the servers bring out hot chocolate and inspirit the lively scene Van Allsburg drew in the book. This use of music establishes a merry mood to the train ride and provides a break the pace of the story. In a similar vein, the song about the Northern Lights is almost misplaced as the full-action scenes prior to the song are halted by the children's soft lyricism essentially pausing the train while on its tracks.

In *Jumanji*, several unnecessary details were added to the film which took away from the core of the childlike adventure emphasized in the book. For example, the fact that Alan Parrish's father was wealthy and owned a shoe company was completely irrelevant to the plot line. The illustration in the picture book depicted parents dressed in opera-going attire and the filmmakers cultivated a complex backstory from there. Similarly, the death of Judy and Peter's parents seemed to be an additional dynamic that overcomplicates the relationship between characters. In the book, the children experience adventure and learn the hard lesson of following the rules of the game entirely. It seems that the film attempted to adapt and inflate the role of the quiet Jumanji guide in the picture book by creating Van Pelt, the hunter villain, who pawns his 1947 rifle for a 1995 sniper rifle. The entire character development of the hunter is misshapen as he is murderous and clearly the same actor as Alan Parrish's father. Logistically, this makes the viewer wonder if there were financial problems within the film's production causing one actor to take on two separate roles. However, what I can assume is that there had been yet another interwoven plot line within the film about Mr. Sam Parrish also being sucked into Jumanji and further transformed into the hunter, which was removed during post-production editing.

Movie reviews "read" films by highlighting particular qualities of a movie and pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of its production. Some reviewers applauded

the nonstop special effects in *Jumanji* while others slammed the director for shoddy computer graphic imaging. Nevertheless, reviewers who liked the film agreed that the visual and audio special effects added "entertainment" quality and would broaden the child-themed plot to more mature audiences, thus justifying the high-octane scenes of adventure. Although the written text version of the book is quite adventurous for a picture book, the mad intensity and length of the film over extends the events of the text. The film results in a two-hour entertainment show filled with back-to-back life-threatening scenes, screams, and destruction.

Furthermore, movie reviewers consider the target audience of films. For picture books turned to film, it makes sense that the events of the film remain appropriate for children. In the case of *Jumanji*, nearly every reviewer commented that the PG rating was inappropriate as the suspense and thrills were too violent and frightening for young children. Many argued that a PG-13 rating would be much more appropriate. Of all of the characters in the film to make comments about, the reviewers often chose to pick out the role of the human hunter, Van Pelt, and how his killer mentality was overtly neurotic for the theme of the board game.

Aldred argues that there is an unnatural phenomenon occurring in new cinematic spectatorship and experiences. She says that the digital space of the computerized world is being blurred into and with real human experiences. Her article points out that *The Polar Express* film follows the typical formula for video game design resulting in an adventure game with the end-goal of believing in Santa and the spirit of Christmas. Aldred observes that the domestication of computer-generated imaging is becoming ever more commonplace, thus creating a new aesthetic in cinematic works. People expect special effects, she claims, and filmmakers produce what people want to experience. Consequently, the digital narrative in *The Polar Express* stems from the idea that the virtual children in the film show viewers their point of view through "camera shots" (i.e., virtual camera shots) which emulate leveling up in a video game. One stage after another, the children survive and are rewarded with the trip to the North Pole. Aldred concludes that although the children in the film win the game, we must all be wary about the future of human subjectivity and discernment as well as real bodily experiences.

Additionally, Aldred explores the use of first-person gaming in her article by citing video game examples such as *Doom* and *Halo*. She relates this perspective to director Robert Zemeckis' overt use of point-of-view framing and reverse angles to show how some of scenes in *The Polar Express* are dizzying to follow. I wonder why Aldred did not address the first-person narrative of Van Allsburg's book and how the film may have attempted to depict a first person perspective with regard to the written text. With Aldred's evident wariness about the convoluted space in cinema for human experiences and virtual experiences, it would be probable to ascertain that she is also nervous about the future production of a completely first-person digital adventure mirroring a video game experience even more closely than *The Polar Express* did.

In relation, one *Jumanji* reviewer argued that the *Jumanji* film was modeled after game theory as well. Consider for a moment, the stages in the film and how each player had to survive the round in order to move on and ultimately end the game. What is interesting about this is that Chris Van Allsburg wrote both books. It seems logical that the *Jumanji* film was surrounded around the playing of a board game because of the events of the original text; however, the fact that *The Polar Express* film was transformed

into a visual spectacle also following the stage model of game theory is surprising. This begs further investigation about Van Allsburg's unknown idiosyncrasies and predilections.

Wilson calls *Jumanji* a work of "fictional fiction." Her argument is centered on how the time period and setting of the film connect to larger American ideologies. She says that the wealthy young Alan Parrish of 1969 depicted what All-American New England was like pre-Vietnam War. Moreover, the 1995 jungle-like Alan Parrish resembles a post-Vietnam War veteran haphazardly returning to his childhood home. Wilson's analysis places the film in the context of American political events as well as provides social commentary on what she believes was the ideal 1990s family unit—the perfect nuclear family. It is necessary to point out here that Wilson wrote the article in 1996, amid the decade she commented about. Wilson extends her views to include how the film does not touch on racial differences or racism and merely includes the "benevolent" policeman who is African American. This is interesting as Wilson begins to address what she calls, "darkest Africa" which is the depiction of African wild animals and beasts in the film. Despite the reality context Wilson asserts, she does not remind, or inform, readers that the film was an adaptation of a book.

Many factors contribute to the production of a film such as the budget size and marketing goals. The use of special effects and computer-generated imaging mad up a great deal of the budget expenses for both films. Despite the $165 million budget for *The Polar Express*, Tom Hanks was the voice of six different characters: Hero Boy, Father, Conductor, Hobo, Scrooge, and Santa Claus. The individualities of these critically dissimilar characters may have been blurred as the same person provided their voices. It is possible that observant child viewers may be confused by the similarities in speech and never actually differentiate the characters at all. What would be interesting is if visually impaired children listened to this film and reported on how many different characters they believed made up the story.

Based on this week's work, there is evidently little obligation to the text. A film can keep nearly any level of fidelity to the original so long as the main events of the beginning and ending refer to events in the text. Filmmakers are driven to write a screenplay with enhancements in plot, character, setting, theme, and style. The use of sound, camera angles, shot transitions, and editing control the flow of the story and ultimately produce something considered "entertaining." Visual effects and lighting further intensify mood. None of these aspects are determined by the text of a picture book and thus cannot oblige filmmakers to compromise their own production priorities and requirements with that of the author's limited words.