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Final Project

**“a filmmaker is an independent artist, not a translator for an established author,
but a new author in his own right.”**
—George Bluestone

The Polar Express

In this paper I will compare the 1985 children’s book *The Polar Express* by Chris Van Allsburg with the 2004 animated feature film directed by Robert Zemeckis distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures. It will be exploring the message George Bluestone has written above, as it relates to children’s literature in film.

The children’s book *The Polar Express* is a beautiful work of art written and illustrated by Chris Van Allsburg. There’s a powerful set of emotions that accompany the reader as they turn the pages. The illustrations are stunning yet somber, and you really get a sense of the feelings the author wants you to associate with the words he has written.

This isn’t an exciting book. There’s very little action that takes place. A boy gets onto a train that magically appears in front of his house. On board the boy drinks hot cocoa with some other unnamed children. Next, he reaches the north pole, where he meets Santa Claus. The boy receives the first gift of Christmas, which he wishes to be a silver bell from Santa’s sleigh. He loses the bell. The bell is returned to him Christmas morning. It’s a short story, that doesn’t have very much character development.

The real magic of the book is in the descriptions given to the reader’s surroundings. One of my favorite lines of text describes the boy’s first sight of the train, “It was wrapped in an apron of steam.” The accompanying image doesn’t exactly show this. I have the feeling the steam has already been carried away with the wind, but the words are there... I can see it.

Robert Zemeckis was very much an independent artist in the case of this film adaptation. The illustrations from the book serve as a visual blueprint for the images in the film. The “apron of steam” can be seen and is subsequently removed in a most exquisite fashion. But beyond the appearance of the train, characters, and environment, the similarities begin to fall away quite dramatically. The filmmakers have added a vast amount of unseen and even unmentioned characters and events. I will attempt to address the ones which struck me the most.

The first and I believe most important adaptation from book to film was the characterization of the conductor. In earlier papers I have discussed the importance of casting decisions. This film had the benefit of casting Tom Hanks in the newly created main role of the conductor. He also voiced Santa Claus, the newly introduced character of the Hobo Spirit of Christmas, and even a scrooge jack-in-the-box. The role that Mr. Hanks voiced the most, however, was that of the conductor. In the book this character spoke but was never seen. I can see how the filmmakers used this part to create the main Hanks character. I think a great deal of the film is the director's exploration of the things children perhaps wonder about when reading the book. Beyond asking what the conductor might look like, a reader might wonder more about the other children on board, or how does the train move and who else works on it, what do the elves do and where do they live, and how exactly does Santa get that big sleigh off the ground?

A great deal of the film goes into answering these very questions. There is the introduction of three diverse characters in the other children. We get to see some silly new characters working in the boiler room. There is also the added Hobo character who seems to be some kind of ghost. We get to see more of the north pole, specifically the inner workings of Santa's massive workshop. We also get to see more of the mechanics of how Santa gets around in his sleigh.

I should say of equal importance to the additional characterizations, is the change in plot from the book to film. In the first few lines of the book our young boy says he is a believer in Santa, unlike his friend, a friend who we never see. Zemeckis gives us quite a different tale. In the movie the boy starts as a non-believer, so much that he can't even see Santa or hear the sleigh bells at first. In fact, the entire movie is basically an adventure trying to convince him of the truth; that Santa is real. He really holds out for quite a long time in the movie if you consider all the amazing events that fall upon him. Despite this major shift in storyline, I will give the filmmakers credit, they still managed to close the circle and capture the original message I believe Van Allsburg intended. They just chose a much longer and convoluted path to get there, and this I believe, encapsulates the quote from George Bluestone quite well.

Before I started this course, I put a heavy emphasis on what I have learned to call *fidelity to the original*. This meaning, I felt very strongly that books should be adapted into film in a way that adheres as strictly as possible to the original artist's vision. I think this feeling came from desire to not see great works of art being trampled and mangled by Hollywood consumerism. There were some examples of this in the course, though not quite what I expected. One of my favorite children's films, *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate factory*, was a perversion of the original story by Ronald Dahl that the author himself took great Umbridge too, yet I still

enjoy the film immensely to this day. So, I've learned to accept that variations from book to film can sometimes be appreciated or not, and this also has a lot to do with the audience.

Regarding *The Polar Express*, I would like to make the admission that I'm quite certain my mother read this book to me as a child. I was aware of the film when it was released in theatres, and before this assignment I was trying to remember why I didn't want to see it when it was released. In 2004 it had probably been almost 20 years since the story had been read to me, but I knew one thing, the original story was simple and wholesome. It was about the Christmas spirit. Something must have made me not want to see this movie. What was it? After watching the film for this assignment, I had my answer. This film was released in the middle of the IMAX 3D craze that was taking place at the time. It seemed like every film being put out then had to have thirty-plus minutes of gratuitous 3D rollercoaster excitement added so the viewer, wearing some uncomfortable headset, could be slammed around the screen at high velocity, ducking and dodging obstacles and objects, just to end up in a dizzying mess right back where the plot left off for no reason whatsoever. The whole era made me nauseous. And while you did have the option of seeing the film on a normal screen, you couldn't remove the content created for the 3D technology. You still had to sit through the distractions. Some movies that could have run for ninety minutes were stretched to nearly three hours for this stuff.

Maybe it's due to the fact we are no longer in the craze, so every other film isn't released with so much nonsense, that I was able to enjoy watching this film. Despite all the fast action being added to the film for exciting camera angles, I really enjoyed the imagery the film gave me. There have been some examples in class where films have become a way to enhance the images found in the original text. *The Wizard of Oz* was a good example of this. Seeing the shift into color on screen, in my view, added to images readers may have had regarding the difference between Kansas and Oz. In a similar way, I feel that the computer animation in *The Polar Express* added to my experience from reading the book. It helped me with the imagery I had in my head and not found in the illustrations. The "apron of steam" is a simple but effective example of this.

In our group discussion we came across the issue of appropriateness when presenting children's novels and their accompanying film versions to students. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was our topic. We decided that there needed to be some discretion used at times. The material may need to be presented in a teachable way, so the message is not damaging. Willy Wonka can be a conflicting character in his raw form and may deliver a poor message to young readers and viewers.

This leads me to how I made the decision to choose this book and film. Before the class I may have naively assumed that any film with a G or PG rating would be acceptable in the classroom. I've learned that the absence of violence, curse words, and other risky content are not the only things that need to be considered.

In a previous section of the course we looked at the book and film pairing of *Where the Wild Things Are*. This was a very interesting topic because it dealt with an original text that was quite small. It was mostly the illustrations that made up the content and there was very little text. What little text there was had been written in a very simple way. The filmmakers in this instance had to take a very limited amount of original work and turn the story into a full-length feature film, all while trying not to cause damage to the piece of art that was their inspiration. This seemed like quite a challenge.

I knew *The Polar Express* was adapted from a picture book much in the same way as *Where the Wild Things Are*. I like the idea of reading literature and films that are more visual and less reliant on long chapters of text for the types of classroom environments I'm usually in. I am an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher in Southeast Asia. It's been my experience that sometimes the vocabulary and literacy of my students is limited in the English language. Most times, my students respond better to more colorful and visual stimulus. This book and movie pairing will work very nicely in my classroom.

I plan to focus on the descriptive text Chris Van Allsburg uses to accompany his illustrations. I would like my students to explore new ways to interpret nouns and adjectives; how an "apron" is not always an "apron." I would like them to see and feel their environments. I want them to know what qualities make hot cocoa appealing. I want them to know what the coldness and darkness of the forest mean to the story, and why the wolves are lean.

When watching the film, I would like to focus on the differences, and to some degree why they are important. I would like the students to see the two texts from their own perspectives as works of art, not merely from the perspective of which version they prefer or find more entertaining. This is something I too have learned to do differently through this course.

I would like my students to notice how the film version of the story amplifies the things they already know. I want them to see how films can show things without saying them. The scene where the reindeer are jumping, but the boy cannot hear the bells comes to mind. I also want them to consider how much the film remains true to the original story and why this is important, or at least survey to see if they see any importance to this issue at all. Perhaps because they didn't grow up knowing these stories it won't matter as much to them. I want to attempt these subject matters with them because I think it would be nice for them to see

literature as something that can be studied and not merely used for entertainment. I want them to see that there are messages in books and films that they might not have noticed before, or that are completely lacking from some films they have seen in pop culture.

What I'm really hoping is that for some students I might be able to encourage them to read a little more. I've found that students on this side of the world do very little reading in their spare time. This is true for academics and leisure. For some of them, watching TV and playing on their phones encompasses all their time spent away from eating, sitting in class, and doing chores at home. For many of them this intellectually limiting form of media overlaps into those activities as well. Hopefully I can use some of the things I've learned in this course to be more of an inspiration to them.

This last paragraph brings me to the concept of teaching as a form of interpretation. I encounter this aspect regularly in my profession for a myriad number of reasons.

A tangible example of this would be the teaching materials available to me. Text books, even some of the best designed for ESL, are rarely geared directly towards the culture and background of your student body. This is true for monocultural classrooms where the text may not have a specific preference to that culture, and always true when teaching in a multicultural classroom. This being the case, I often find myself changing and adapting material to be more focused for my students. These changes could be to make certain material easier to understand based on their comprehension level. It could also very easily be an attempt to make the subject matter more relatable and thus more entertaining to learn about.

Continuing with the concept of interpretation I think it's important for a teacher to know the makeup of their classroom. This will help to inform them when planning material and activities for the lesson. In the same way a comedian might want to know what their audience will be like demographically, an ESL teacher will want to know ages, backgrounds, and comprehension levels.

Finally, this brings me to how teachers interpret literature and film. I think before this class I may have viewed film as a way of bringing an entertaining visual aid into the classroom without much thought of how to explore the nuances of the film in greater depth. I think as a teacher I might be able to help the class interpret some of the moral lessons the film may have taught, but I may not have been able look deeper.

I think in the case of literature, teachers often use books merely as a tool for checking reading comprehension. They may be non-interpreters to a point because they're only interested in checking to see if the students can answer questions about what they just read. I believe that teachers can serve as a better conduit for

learning through interpretation of literature. Using the Polar Express as my example. I think I can help my students do more than just answer simple questions about clothing, candies, and snow. I think I can inspire them to look further into the text and understand beyond what is written directly into the text. This is the essence of what I see teachers' roles in interpretation. It's for them to make interpretations, or have read the interpretations of others, and then find a way to elicit the same understandings in their classrooms.

It's been a fast and amazing journey these past few weeks. I'm confident the different areas and considerations we've come across this term will prove most useful in the future. Novels that have achieved the status that some of our subject matter have are works of art, movies inspired by them are works of art in their own right, and teachers are free to interpret these works and create art in the classroom.