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The Hobbit

Fidelity or fallacy?

Bachelor's project in English Lektor

Supervisor: Eli Løfaldi

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Abstract

This thesis is about exploring the question of fidelity towards the source material when it comes to the adaptations of *The Hobbit* and how breaking away from it while staying within a discourse of fidelity towards the source material works well in this case. By combing through the children's book, *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien and watching the films and looking for information from the producers of the films themselves this has been explored.

Going through particular scenes from all three film adaptations and seeing how the changes they made from the book translated onto the screen and how the director of the films has argued for these changes the thesis offers the following conclusion. The changes made when adapting *The Hobbit* from book to films worked within a discourse of fidelity while still breaking away from the original content, while at the same time being able to give the viewers a better understanding of the original source material itself.

Introduction

Fidelity towards the original source material when adapting novels into a movie or television show. How to proceed in this matter has been a head scratcher for producers, authors, literary analysts and the fans of the original source material. How to go about this changes depending on whom you ask, and opinions will vary greatly. Opinions regarding this matter have also changed greatly from whence it first became a thing for people to look at and until now, and time has had its effect on those opinions. One novel which has been adapted into the cinema is the first novel from John Ronald Reuel Tolkien in the Tolkien universe, *The Hobbit, or there and back again*. It is not the only novel from Tolkien which has been adapted into cinematic form as his later novels collectively titled *The Lord of The Rings* saw great success in the early 2000's. It is however the *Hobbit* movies which are going to be the focus of this text and with that focusing on the concepts of fidelity. When adapting the novel into the trilogy we ended up with there were a number of changes made to the story. Some things were removed, and some were added, both small and minor details. These changes have the possibility of both removing essential pieces of information which shape the perception and understanding of the story and also adding new elements which contain the possibility for heightening understanding of the source material, but also simply do nothing for the source material itself.

Fidelity to the original source material is rarely seen to be a useful tool for analysis these days as it used to be some time ago. What spiked the interest for writing this thesis is a piece of information that I read in *The Cambridge companion to Literature on screen* which stirred my thoughts. The reason it stirred my thoughts was because what I read was in accordance with my own observations on the matter. It was in regard to the adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* novels mentioned previously. It was there stated that while not having fidelity as a criterion for adaptation could be seen as freeing and that trying to adhere to the master text is something that is not desirable because the source material will always be better at being the original than any adaptation, that is not the case with *The Lord of the Rings*. The reason for this being that the fans of the books already would have an investment in seeing it “faithfully” made to the screen. Therefore, the makers of the movies could not dismiss fidelity as a concept for *The Lord of the Rings* and by that reasoning had to work within a fidelity discourse because of the book’s extraordinary standing in popular culture (Cartmell & Whelehan, 2007, p. 155). And it is by that case I see it fit to write about fidelity in regard to the adaptations of *The Hobbit* and the trilogy it produced on screen. The reasons being the same as hitherto stated and that it is very possible that this standing in popular culture was magnified after the success of the *Lord of the Rings* adaptations and the expectations of the audience in regard to the *Hobbit* adaptations could possibly be the same.

As such the method I will proceed with in this thesis will be to do an analytical literature study. I will reread *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 2007) and rewatch the movie adaptations of it. In addition to this I will also scour the internet for interviews with the directors of the adaptations to see if they give any arguments or clues for how and why they chose the methods they did. With this method I will look for arguments and clues to support my thesis: **The elements added or changed in the adaptations of *The Hobbit* movies can add more to the story without breaking up the progression of the original storyline so much that it makes the story incoherent while still having fidelity towards the original source material? And that the added elements in the adaptations have the possibility of giving us a different or better image and understanding of the source material.**

When it comes to what I expect to find during this study I expect to find three key things. I expect to find arguments from the directors themselves as to why they chose to add or remove

certain elements that could support my thesis. I expect to find evidence that supports my thesis when it comes to keeping the story coherent when adding elements that were not in the original source material, or indeed removing them, and I expect to find evidence that some of the elements added or subtly changed were able to give us a better image and or understanding of the world and story the source material presents to us.

To get to the bottom of the thesis question I will go through some of the key scenes or elements which were either altered or made up and see if they produce any significant disturbances to the storyline in the ways mentioned previously. This will be done in a chronological order starting with *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (Jackson, 2013), following with *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (Jackson, 2014) and lastly *The Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies* (Jackson, 2015). After this there will be a section where I put in information from the director which can shed light on why they took the liberties to add and alter as they did.

Disclaimers

Before setting out to discover an answer to the proposed thesis a couple of disclaimers are in order. The film adaptations are what is known to be the cinematic editions meaning that these are the movies made for the cinema and do not contain the following: They do not contain deleted scenes which were made for the movie but ultimately cut out and does not exist as an official part of the storyline of these movies, no matter which edition one watches. They also do not contain the scenes one would see in the extended editions which are longer and contain more material. This means that the analysis and conclusions derived from this thesis has the possibility of differing from an analysis which would contain the extra content in the aforementioned examples.

The book which the adaptations stem from is also not necessarily the original title written by J.R.R. Tolkien the first time around. Paraphrasing notes on the text before the first chapter in the book the edition I am looking at has gone through a computer program looking for mistakes and corrected them and has also been compared to the latest confirmed edits done by Tolkien himself and tried to match that as close as possible. In other words, even though the copy I am in possession of tries to be as close to the author's intended final writings it is impossible to say that it absolutely is (Tolkien, 2007, p ix).

Key scenes and elements for The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey

Starting with a certain element that was added in the first film and was prevalent for the remainder of the trilogy is the addition of the character named Azog the defiler. Even though this is a character that appears in all three movies I find it fitting to take the discussion around him in the first movie he makes an appearance. As mentioned, this character is prevalent in all three movies and is seen as one of the main antagonists in the story presented in the films. However, this character is not a part of the Hobbit book and is mentioned exactly once through the course of the book in a brief conversation between two characters, Gandalf and Thorin. “*Your grandfather Thrór was killed, you remember, in the mines of Moria by Azog the Goblin.*” (Tolkien, 2007, p 25). The question then becomes, does the inclusion of this character break up the storyline to the point of incohesion and or does his inclusion give us a better image or understanding of the source material? In regard to the first question I would argue that his inclusion does not break the storyline and make it incoherent. The reasons being that his character gives the viewers a clear antagonist at crucial points in the story where other less defined characters or groups of characters would have his place in the books. A good example of this being where the protagonists in the Hobbit are trapped on a mountain side and in the books the protagonists are attacked by a nameless pack of wolves and goblins (Tolkien, 2007, p 92-99), but in the movies it is Azog and his band of orcs hunting them down the mountain side (Jackson, 2013). It does not break the progression of the story because the outcome is largely the same as if he were not included so his inclusion can be said to work within the frames of fidelity, if not completely faithful to the source material, and therefore not breaking story progression and cohesion. In regard to whether his character added something to better understand the source material is unclear. I hypothesize that having a single antagonist to focus on in key events such as the example above could better produce the feeling the books gave of being chased, but it remains unclear if Azog the defiler made us understand the source material better.

Something they changed when it came to how the story is told in the movies as opposed to the book is how the protagonists in the book, Bilbo Baggins and the dwarfs, usually got into trouble. In the movies the viewers are given logical reasons for why the group is finding itself in huge amounts of trouble. A good example of this being when they are captured by a group of trolls that are going to eat them. In the movies the explanation or logical reason for this turn of events is that their ponies have gone missing and Bilbo is sent out to look for them and discovers the

band of trolls, which results in Bilbo and the dwarfs being captured (Jackson, 2013). The events we are presented with in the book are slightly different. In the book the reason for why Bilbo is sent to investigate the position in which the trolls are camping is simply because they could see a faint light in the distance. And because the dwarves were curious to see what was happening and if there might be someone there who wanted to share food and drink (Tolkien, 2007, p 32-33). The question then becomes does this make the story incoherent in any way and thus breaking story progression? Bilbo and the dwarves do still end up investigating the troll camping site and they do still end up being captured and in need of finding means of escape. I would argue that since events do unfold in roughly the same way both in the book and in the movie, it does not break story progression. Another argument to add to this is that the logical way they find themselves in trouble in the movies could possibly be a better way of translating the events of the book onto the screen for the viewers and it still works within a discourse of fidelity since the events do transpire in a similar manner with minor changes. Could this possibly also give us a better understanding of the source material? The behavior of the trolls is described quite well in the book, even mentioning the fact they eat the equivalent of more than a village per troll, something which is not mentioned in the movie (Jackson, 2013 & Tolkien, 2007, p 33). The facts that the trolls have stolen the ponies from the group could be another way of giving the viewers an insight into the grotesqueness and insatiable hunger of trolls in the book. It does not necessarily shed more light on the source material directly, but the movie has then found another way of putting in this detail other than in dialogue such as in the book. This could also be a better way of proceeding since a movie is visual and sometimes showing something can be more telling than the act of speaking.

Key scenes and elements for The hobbit: The desolation of Smaug

Moving on to the second movie in the trilogy there are certain key elements and scenes worth exploring such as the addition of two new characters which were not mentioned in the book at all and that is the addition of the characters Legolas and Tauriel. These characters appear in the movie when the protagonists are in the country of the elves, Mirkwood, and are part of the group capturing Bilbo and the dwarves and bringing them to the Elf King (Jackson, 2014). The two chapters in the book which coincides with when these characters appear in the movie does not give a single mention of these characters at all, which is quite weird considering how much time the movie devotes to these characters, even inserting a love triangle between these characters and

one of the dwarves (Jackson, 2014 & Tolkien, 2007, p 130-173). As mentioned, these characters are not mentioned at all in the book at all but given quite an amount of screen time so how does this affect the story? Does it make the story incoherent and break progression? And does it give us a better image and understanding of the source material? As far as story progression and coherence goes the addition of these two characters does not impede the story's progression and only minor changes in the capture of the dwarves and their subsequent escape from the elves so it does not break the story progression and coherence. In regard to the matter of giving us a better understanding of the source material there are some things of note. The addition of more named characters besides the Elf King who is only mentioned as King or Elf King in the book (Tolkien, 2007, p 154-155) gives us more interactions between elves than we have in the book. This opens up for the movie to give us a better view of how the world of elves and how the interaction between them was shedding more light on what was not explained in great detail in the book. So, this element and scenes from the movie does give us a better understanding of the source material than we would have had without them.

Another element that was introduced in this movie which is already mentioned above is the element of romance. This element is completely absent from the book but is quite fleshed out in this movie and the next one between Tauriel the elf, Legolas the elf and Kili the dwarf (Jackson, 2014 & 2015). Does this romance make the story incoherent, breaking the story progression, and does it give us a better understanding of the source material? The addition of this romance can hardly be said to give a better understanding of the source material because it does not give us a better view of anything that is in the source material itself. However, the addition of this romance does not necessarily make the story incoherent and break progression. The love triangle that arises is subtle in the movies, only showing true affection after Tauriel saves Kili's life from poison and at the moment of death when Kili dies in the last movie (Jackson, 2015) and does not change much in the final outcome of the story since Kili did die in the same fight, the only difference being a slight location change and time of death (Tolkien, 2007, p 265). One could argue that it takes attention away from what was more in focus in the book but that still does not break the story progression in any way and on a positive note, gave the viewers another aspect of storytelling to be engaged and feel with.

Key scenes and elements for The Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies

Moving on to the last movie in the trilogy we shall start with an element which is quite a big change between the book and the movie but not necessarily in a way which is story breaking in any way. This is a change in how the narrative progresses in the movie versus the book. In the book when the final battle between five different armies, making the name of the movie aptly named, starts off they are quite similar at the start, but that is where the similarities end. In the book as the battle is about to start fully the main character Bilbo is knocked out and we do not get to know anything else before he wakes up again and the battle is already over with (Tolkien, 2007, p 260-261). What happens in the movie is however very different. Bilbo is knocked out at one point during the battle here as well, but much much later, and is able to witness many of the things which he would have been out cold for in the book. Something worth mentioning here as well is the fact that what actually happened during the battle is glossed over in the book as well, and one does not get a good explanation for what actually happened when Bilbo was out cold (Tolkien, 2007, p 262-266). The question then becomes, does this narrative change make the story incoherent, breaking story progression, and does it give us a different or better image of the source material? I would argue no the first point and yes to the second. The change in narrative structure here does not break the storyline in any way because this was a golden opportunity for the writers and director to do as they pleased. All of what happened in this battle after Bilbo was knocked out in the book was a possibility to flesh out the battle in the best possible way on screen without any repercussion to the story. Also, if one discounts the fact that Bilbo was knocked out much earlier in the book and that there were a few additional or different characters which did not appear in the book there is no direct source material contradicting what happened on the screen. So not only does it not break the storyline, but it also gives us a much better image of what could have happened while Bilbo was knocked out without the need for recounting it afterwards. Most of what can be said about the happenings of this movie versus what happened in the book is already covered since the battle takes up most of it and there are not any other big differences to point at.

Arguments from the makers of the film themselves

After having looked at how the changes made in the movie adaptations have possibly affected the story progression and how it has possibly given us a better view of the source material it would also be interesting to see what the makers of the films have to say about why things were

changed. In one interview the director of all three movies, Peter Jackson gives us a few reasons for why he changed the things he did. He states that adapting the story of the Hobbit would in general be difficult because it was written as a children's book and had a different narrative structure to begin with. He also states that many of the added stuff we see in the movies was because of the influence The Lord of the Rings films already had in the world and that he also wanted the Hobbit trilogy to be a prequel, meaning a back story or a story which precedes the Lord of the Rings trilogy, setting up the background for that story. Many of these additions and changes also came to be because of a completely different book. In the last book The Lord of the Rings series there was plenty of extra information about the universe Tolkien himself had created in the appendix of that book and Jackson took inspiration from this and his previous work when making The Hobbit (MiddleOfMiddleEarth, 2014, 00:20). So, these adaptations were clearly not made without influence from many other places than the original book itself.

Summary, conclusion and final thoughts

There were quite a few changes made when adapting The Hobbit into a movie trilogy, from the addition of new characters, adding an element of romance, changing the way the characters acted and got themselves into certain situations and changing the narrative structure. After looking at all of these things can we get an answer to the question on whether the elements added or changed in the adaptations of The Hobbit movies can add more to the story without breaking up the progression of the original storyline so much that it makes the story incoherent while still having fidelity towards the original source material? And that the added elements in the adaptations have the possibility of giving us a different or better image and understanding of the source material? The answer looks to be yes. The changes made are by and large not breaking the storyline and making it incoherent in any way or form and in many instances give us a better view and or understanding of the source material itself, and at least does not take away from it. In addition, the adaptations were in the director's own words made to fit into the already established Tolkien universe, so some leeway had to be given. There are of course more changes made to the adaptations of The Hobbit than what has been recounted here, but these were some good examples as to how the changes in the adaptations were done. Also getting the director's own words on why some of the changes we see were there makes it so the adaptations make more sense from a chronological point of view, since they were indeed made to be prequels. For the future it would be interesting to discover more about what fidelity does to adaptations when

there already is a big interest for how they turn out and the makers of these have a certain pressure to not stray too far from the source material.

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