Adaptable, Edible, Oedipal?
The His-story of Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and its Adaptations

Abstract

This article explores the two film adaptations of Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*: Mel Stuart’s 1971 *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* and Tim Burton’s 2005 *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. It champions Robert Stam’s (2004) approach to adaptation, which looks at the way a text positions itself in relation to earlier texts in the light of the surrounding cultural environment, arguing that this is a more flexible and “adaptable” approach than earlier favoured models, such as Geoffrey Wagner’s influential tripartite approach (1975). It is argued that these adaptations, despite some attempts at political correctness (especially regarding the Oompa-Loompas) have been at the expense of the feminine, which has been marginalised.

Keywords: Adaptation; Roald Dahl; Children’s Film; Mel Stuart; Tim Burton; Feminism.

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Introduction: Approaches to Adaptation

This article sets out to look at Roald Dahl’s novel and its two filmic adaptations, to see how the book has itself adapted to changing times. In doing so, it will concentrate on race and gender, arguing that while the work’s racism has been ameliorated, the Chocolate Factory has become a less female-friendly realm. In undertaking this analysis, my article will champion Robert Stam’s approach to adaptation, which avoids the unnecessary categorisation characteristic of earlier approaches.

Before discussing adaptation itself, however, let me first explain my title, which derives from Mel Stuart’s 1971 film. Just before the prize winners enter the Chocolate Room, Gene Wilder’s Wonka informs them that “almost everything you see is eatable – edible.” However, Wilder’s enunciation makes the word “eatable” homophonic with “oedipal.” It sounds as though he actually says, “almost everything you see is oedipal.” Given the problems that Wilder’s Wonka has with his words, let alone the associations that the name Willy Wonka conjures up, it is a fruitful pun, and especially appropriate when it comes to analysing Tim Burton’s adaptation. All this will be unpacked in due course but let me begin by contrasting the traditional approach to adaptation with Stam’s model.

Theorisation in this area has mainly come from film studies, and commonly takes a tripartite view of how a work changes in the process of transitioning from book to screen. Geoffrey Wagner’s 1975 model is one of the most well-known. He starts with what is seen as the main
criterion for a successful adaptation, as upheld by the general public: that of being faithful to an original. This he calls “transposition,” meaning that a work is simply moved across from one medium to another, as though the difference in media were negligent. His other two types of adaptation are “commentary” and “analogy.” With the former, the framework of the original is held on to, but there is a recognition that some things have been altered, whether this is as a result of the shift to the visual medium itself or because attitudes have changed (as, for example, towards women, the disabled, non-heterosexual groups, etc.). In the third type, “analogy,” there is more of a radical reworking of the source text, often using it as a springboard for the production of a new work of art.

In the abstract, we can appreciate the distinctions that Wagner makes. But because, as Robyn McCallum admits, “[t]hese are very fluid categories, with no clear demarcations among them” (p. 75), their usefulness seems to me to be compromised. McCallum’s examples demonstrate this, describing Betty Thomas’s film of Dr. Dolittle as “more than an analogy […] being] a commentary on its pre-texts” (p. 76); and suggesting that a film like Matilda (1996) “elaborates on its transposition of the novel in ways that exaggerate elements of the novel, responding to an already carnivalesque text”; likewise, she suggests that Madeline (1998) “straddles Wagner’s categories of transposition and analogy” (p. 75). As analytical tools, then, this approach lacks precision, for all adaptations transpose an original in some way; and, in doing so, they cannot help but comment on the ur-text, even if subliminally, suggesting analogies with other texts or current events. The same criticism applies to revisions of this popular tripartite model, too, like Dudley Andrew’s (1984) or Brian McFarlane’s (1996).

In contrast, Robert Stam’s approach seems more flexible and nuanced (or “adaptable”) in that it recognises that all creative works are, at heart, intertextual; that is, that they all draw on earlier texts in order to make their meaning. Changes, or adaptations, are therefore produced by similar shifts in intertextuality. Stam (2004, p. 3) thus prefers to use the term “mutations”:

if mutation is the means by which the evolutionary process advances, then we can also see filmic adaptations as “mutations” that help their source novel “survive.” Do not adaptations “adapt to” changing environments and changing tastes, as well as to a new medium, with its distinct industrial demands, commercial pressures, censorship taboos, and aesthetic norms?

Stam’s approach permits us to look more closely at how adaptations alter their pre-texts in order that that text will be better suited to new times and circumstances. But, of course, it is also the case that the original text will seem to have changed if we view it from a new perspective – whether this is brought about as a result of the ineluctable march of time, or as a result of some more major displacement (e.g. refracting the text through a particular theoretical lens: feminist, Marxist, eco-critical, or whatever). As I shall argue, adaptations of Dahl’s original book have sought to address some of its rather dated attitudes towards race and gender but, as I shall also suggest, attention to the former has been more successful than the latter.

**Interexts in Dahl’s Charlie and Mel Stuart’s adaptation**

The two adaptations of Dahl’s Charlie appeared almost two generations apart: Mel Stuart’s Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (1971), and Tim Burton’s Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (2005). They are both excellent exemplars of Stam’s approach to adaption, being
rich in intertextual quotation, showing how phrases are both revitalised and refracted when they are placed in different contexts, and how an original is itself transformed over time.

Before proceeding with the filmic adaptations, though, it is first necessary to consider the source text, and not least the problem of identifying how “original” any source is, especially if we recognise that all texts have their pre-texts; that is, intertexts that have helped to shape them. It would be a mistake to imagine any text emerging in some pristine, coherent form. As for Charlie, we certainly know that is has quite a chequered history. Thus, as Donald Sturrock notes, in earlier versions, “Charlie is a ‘small NEGRO boy’” (2010, p. 397); moreover, the book started with far more Golden Ticket winners (ten in all). The process of revision did not end with the publication of the novel, either – which occurred in America in 1964 but not until three years later in the UK. Each of these editions also had its own illustrator, giving Dahl’s novel a very different feel in each country. Joseph Schindelman’s illustrations for the former are more cartoon-like, creating the characters out of very sketchy backgrounds (Dahl, 1964), whereas Faith Jacques’ illustrations for the UK edition are more detailed and naturalistic (Dahl, 1967).

But these respective versions of the “original” text are certainly not the ones that most of us know, either. For the way the Oompa-Loompas were represented was subject to some pointed criticism, much of which seems to have been galvanised as a result of the 1971 film, where the black pygmies from Africa had their appearance and origins radically altered. In the film they became orange creatures from Loompaland (with carefully coiffured green hair and white eyebrows), dressed in bizarre, short-trouser romper suits. So Dahl agreed to amend his novel in a similarly, less offensive way, giving the Oompa-Loompas “rosy-white” skin and “golden-brown” hair, turning them into more hippy-like characters, as the revised illustrations show (Dahl, 1973, p. 85). In this instance we can see adaptation working backwards, the film retrospectively leading to revisions in the novel. But even this text is less likely to be the one that today’s readers know. For, following the success of Quentin Blake’s subsequent partnership with Dahl, Blake then produced illustrations for Dahl’s earlier texts, too; and, for many, these are now recognised as the standard ones (Dahl, 1995).

Dahl’s text is certainly unusual in that it was a film version that resulted in adaptations to the earlier book (what Stam would see as a mutation, making the work more viable in a different cultural environment). Nevertheless, the trope about a white man arriving and seemingly liberating a benighted people (often to introduce them to a different servitude) remains, along with other intertexts. One might, for instance, point to the familiar trope in fairy-tale narratives wherein poor families, thanks to an honest child undertaking a few tests, end up entering the portals of the rich. Or, one might point to the general form of the katabatic narrative, where a hero journeys underground (much of the Chocolate Factory is seen to lie underground) before subsequently emerging aloft and victorious (and Charlie ascends spectacularly). Likewise, there is the Land of Cockaigne, a carnivalesque motif that Dahl has drawn upon (with almost everything in the Chocolate Factory being edible) and, from Greek drama, he has taken the idea of having a chorus that points up the moral significance of the protagonists’ behaviour, showing explicitly, in cautionary tale terms, that naughty, misbehaving children receive their just deserts (and the pun is deliberate). One can, of course, chase down these intertexts even further, to smaller, more specific borrowings, such as, for example, in our initial introduction to this Charlie: “How d’you do? And how d’you do? And how d’you do again?” (1995, p. 13), a phrase that Dahl has taken from the traditional verse,
“One Misty, Moisty Morning.” In fact, it might well have been such specific borrowings that led to Stuart incorporating so many intertextual allusions in his version (from Thomas Edison to Neil Armstrong, Horace to Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll to Ogden Nash).

In terms of the filmic adaptations, Stuart’s, in particular, needs to be treated alongside the novel because Dahl is credited as being the sole screenwriter, although it is well known that another writer, David Seltzer, was brought in to help develop the film, which led to Dahl himself disowning it, and forbidding the making of another version during his lifetime. Which elements, precisely, Dahl was responsible for, is uncertain, but some aspects seem more characteristic of his style, like the mysterious tinker who talks enigmatically about Wonka’s factory, quoting from William Allingham’s nineteenth century poem, “Fairies”:

Up the airy mountain
Down the rushy glen,
We daren’t go a-hunting,
For fear of little men [...] ¹

This strange character seems to echo the mysterious old man from James and the Giant Peach (1961), who offers James a bag of crocodile tongues. But the tinker figure jars with the more modern feel that Dahl has created in his Charlie story, with, say, its spying subplot, which, though present in the original novel, has been extended by having the figure of Slugworth supposedly trying to bribe individual Golden Ticket winners. Again, one might surmise that Dahl’s own British Intelligence work, or his screenplay for an early James Bond movie, might have been influential, let alone the general popularity of spy films in this Cold War era (Dr. No, the first Bond film, appeared in 1962).

To explain such changes, we need to be aware of the cultural reference points of the time, which are quite clearly flagged up by Violet Beauregarde when she asks the question, “What is this – a freak out?” We seem to be in the middle of what would then be termed a “bad trip,” under the influence of that popular recreational drug of the 1960s, LSD. But the impact of popular culture is far more pervasive than these overt references might suggest. The whole notion that ingesting particular substances might lead one to experience alternative realities was very much in vogue at the time, with songs like “The Candy Man Can” and “Pure Imagination” also conveying this idea about “expanding your mind.” The Oompa-Loompas’ appearance also has a psychedelic feel to it that now looks very dated, even if there is meant to be a nod to their precursors, the Munchkins, from the 1939 The Wizard of Oz film. And, in mentioning Oz, there is also the feeling that Gene Wilder plays Wonka in a manner that resonates with Oz’s own enigmatic showman and dictator, such that he gives the film an edginess – present in the book, too – that saves it from a sentimentality that otherwise hovers.

¹ Allingham’s poem itself borrows from Robert Burns’ “Charlie, He’s my Darling” (1946, pp. 166-7) which, given the name, has slightly more connection:

It’s up yon heathery mountain,
And down yon scroggy glen,
We daur na gung a milking,
For Charlie and his men.
**Tim Burton’s *Charlie***

Having shown the intertextual process at work, and how it operates both forwards and backwards, especially in relation to Stuart’s adaptation, I shall now move on to consider Burton’s work more closely in terms of how it deals with the social issues of race and gender, referring to the earlier texts as and when necessary.

**Race and Colonialism**

As noted earlier, despite the changes Dahl made to his original novel, altering the Oompa-Loompas from African black pygmies to natives of Loompaland, they remain subjugated, as Wonka boasts:

“I shipped them all over here, every man, woman, and child in the Oompa-Loompa tribe. It was easy. I smuggled them over in large packing cases with holes in them […] They are wonderful workers. They all speak English now. They love dancing and music.” (1995, pp. 95-6)

Prior to Wonka’s discovery of them, they are depicted as Darwinian failures, subsisting “on green caterpillars” that “tasted revolting,” while also being prey to “the most dangerous beasts in the world,” like whangdoodles, which “would eat ten Oompa-Loompas for breakfast and come galloping back for a second helping” (p. 93). They therefore need looking after, not being capable of running things themselves, unlike all the “thousands of clever men” who would willingly take control (p. 185). Not only are the Oompa-Loompas excluded from management, they are also expected to undertake the more dangerous jobs, such as testing Wonka’s blueberry metamorphosing chewing gum, or his “FIZZY LIFTING DRINKS,” which results in one Oompa-Loompa being lost to the skies. Comments Wonka, insouciantly, “He must be on the moon by now” (pp. 133-4).

The Oompa-Loompas’ deferential manner is also notable – and only slightly downplayed in Stuart’s film. Thus, whereas in the book, “Mr Wonka turned around and clicked his fingers sharply, *click, click, click*, three times. Immediately, an Oompa-Loompa appeared […] and stood beside him” (p. 101), in Stuart’s film, Wonka plays a few notes on a whistle to summon them, much as one might ring a servant bell. This behaviour certainly has a class dimension, but it also smacks of a colonial relationship.

Burton’s adaptation undoubtedly revises the depiction of the Oompa-Loompas: they are assertive rather than deferential, whilst also being shown to be multi-talented beings, featuring as scientists, musicians, psychotherapists and the like. Ingeniously, Burton has tackled the accusations of stereotyping by having the whole tribe played by Deep Roy. In this way, the very notion of a “stereotype” is troubled. The word, originally a printing term, was used to indicate the manner in which something could be replicated repeatedly without change, but as Roy embodies this notion in his own endless reduplication, he undermines comments like “they all look the same.” This is particularly effective given Roy’s own multicultural background: he is African in nationality (Kenyan, in fact), albeit of Indian parentage, and lives in the West. Bold as these changes are, however, it is a shame that Burton was not more radical with the ethnicity of at least one of the Golden Ticket winners (although, having Charlie a black boy – as Dahl originally conceived him – might have been too much of a box-office risk).
Before moving on to discuss gender, it is also worth considering what Dominic Cheetham considers an element “as racist as the original representation of the Oompa-Loompas” (n.d., p. 8); namely, the “anti-Indian” figure of Prince Pondicherry, the character for whom Wonka builds a palace out of chocolate, which subsequently melts. It is a scene that Burton makes much of.

Briefly, Cheetham is perplexed that there hasn’t been a more negative reaction in the UK to this figure, especially since 1972, in the light of the “30,000 people of Indian and Pakistani origin, expelled by Idi Amin from Uganda and hoping to find new homes and lives in Britain,” who were to experience “reactionary racism” in their new homes. Cheetham is nonplussed that this scene “remains as it appeared in the first edition,” concluding that this chapter “is potentially extraordinarily sensitive” (p. 8), or “insensitive,” perhaps, as he says elsewhere.

I would contend, though, that there might be other reasons why this chapter has not been criticised in the manner Cheetham thinks it deserves; for it seems to me that this interpretation is wide of the mark. In fact, Cheetham might be said to demonstrate his own insensitivity by commenting on what he terms the prince’s “humorous, but belittling name” (p. 8). I suspect that the half-million people who live in Pondicherry, south-east India, might take issue with him. But, despite this unfortunate jibe, the appropriate parallel is surely not with dispossessed Ugandan Asians but with Indian princes, some of whom were as dictatorial as Amin; for these royal personages, as functionaries of the British Raj, were the privileged ones, often inhibiting the democratisation of their own people while kowtowing to their British rulers by laying on expensive banquets and tiger hunts.

Pondicherry’s grandiose scheme thus brings to mind similar follies that the powerful have had built elsewhere, like the eighteenth-century ice palace of Empress Anna in St Petersburg. Certainly, Burton’s representation of this scene depicts Pondicherry in this light: as a spoiled prince with the arrogance of a King Canute. It therefore acts as a precursor to the selfish behaviour exhibited by the more privileged, middle-class Golden Ticket winners, and, as I shall suggest later, is one of the rare “abject” scenes in Burton’s adaptation. It is notable, however, as Cheetham observes, that the scene does not feature in Stuart’s film, nor in Blake’s illustrations for the book (though it is prominent in earlier ones).²

**Gender**

The ethnic range of the Golden Ticket winners might be rather restricted but, in terms of gender, they seem more equal. Although, counting Charlie, there is one more boy. However, if he was originally conceived as a black boy, might he not as readily be a “Charlotte,” in the mould of Sophie, perhaps, from Dahl’s later work, The BFG? For me, this would be quite plausible, despite Wonka’s occasionally dated remarks about envisaging his Factory being taken over only by “clever men” (p. 185). As for the gender of Wonka, I shall consider him presently, but first I want to say a few more words about the Oompa-Loompas, for, although Burton has made some bold changes to their racial depiction, other stereotypes have been created: for example, instead of giving Wonka a male secretary, thus bucking a gendered cliché, Burton has Roy in drag, as “Doris,” thus consolidating the notion that Oompa-Loompas are male by default. In the novel, though, they are a mix in terms of both gender

² Curiously, Cheetham’s undated paper does not mention Burton’s 2005 film, although its author cites material accessed in July 2006.
and age, featuring a “village of Oompa-Loompas, with [...] hundreds of Oompa-Loompa children” (p. 154). Both films, in contrast, reduce them to all-male adults.³

I’ll return to the implications of this change later. But for now, I want to consider gender at a level more subtle than the sex of the characters, with a view to showing that the marginalisation of the female, though present in the original text, has been exacerbated in the two movies. I shall begin by looking at the more masculine elements, picking up especially on the oedipal dimensions of the story, before considering the way the feminine lives on.

Markers of Masculinity

Let me begin by considering the Wonkavator, for it seems to be one of the few parts of the factory that is distinctly coded masculine (another is the Television-Chocolate room). This elevator forms a contrast with the more organic feel of the rest of the factory, with its “long pink corridors” (p.131) making it “like a gigantic rabbit warren” (p. 85), and with the Chocolate Room in particular, comprising a “lovely valley” with “green meadows” through which flows a “great brown river” with a “tremendous waterfall” (p. 87) – again, to be discussed in more detail later.

The lift, which is itself elevated to titular status in Dahl’s sequel, Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator (1972) certainly has a more angular, geometric structure, all straight edges and glass planes. It gives Wonka a way of travelling through his empire without touching its “pink” sides. We see this more explicitly in Burton’s film, where the lift is shown moving not only vertically but also horizontally and diagonally (as in the book), let alone travelling, thanks to its angled jets, beyond the factory itself. It is an effective device for exercising what Laura Mulvey (1988/1975) has termed “the male gaze,” being able to travel and oversee everything. Stuart’s construction is less successful in this regard, both in design and versatility, but it still performs that key stunt from Dahl’s novel: crashing through the factory roof with its all-male cargo, three generations of men (Charlie, of course, having chosen his grandfather over his other relatives to accompany him on this trip – though, in an earlier draft of Dahl’s, it had been Charlie’s mother – Keyser, 2017). In fact, in the two films, we only ever see males riding the lift, whereas in the book, Mrs Teavee is also present.

The very name of this lift, the Wonkavator, explicitly links it to the chocolatier, so it is worth considering his name more carefully, for I would argue that, unlike Charlie, it is almost impossible to conceive Wonka as female. A key reason for this is the latter’s explicitly phallic demeanour, as I have argued elsewhere (Rudd, 2018). This is evident just from his name, both elements of which (“Willy,” and the easily transposed vowels of “Wonka”) render its associations far beyond innuendo, especially when we learn that his “vitamin Wonka” is something that makes your “toes grow out, until they’re as long as your fingers” (1995, p. 169). In Charlie and the Glass Elevator, Dahl extends this conceit, having Wonka-Vite described as “the great rejuvenator,” making its taker “as frisky as a frog hopper!” (1972, 103). As I have noted elsewhere, Wonka-Vite “sounds suspiciously like a walking advert for Viagra” (Rudd, 2018, n.p.). And, if that were not enough, there is Wonka’s appearance, for, despite being a small man, he has various ways of extending himself with his “small, neat, pointed black beard,” “black top hat” and “tail coat,” together with his “fine gold-topped

³ In fact, one of the Oompa-Loompas in Stuart’s film was played by a female, Pepi Poupée, albeit she is indistinguishable from the males (https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0693802/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cl_t41).
walking cane”, which we see him “waggling […] in the air” while “hopping up and down” (1995, p. 97).

Then there is his factory, with its “smoke belching […] chimneys” (p. 19), which are something that Burton, in particular, capitalises on, having his Wonka proudly stand before them (the main chimney, in fact, is the very first thing we see in Burton’s film). And, at the other end of the scale, there is the fact that Wonka towers over his workforce of “little Oompa-Loompas” (p. 93). Once again, the films have made more of this, with Johnny Depp’s Wonka proclaiming to the children, whom he persists in addressing namelessly as “little girl” and “little boy,” that he was never as small as them. However, we know that this is not the case from the flashback where we see him out “trick or treating” with his friends, all of whom are far bigger than he is. One mother even refers to him as “Little Willy Wonka.” Given the visual homage to Stephen Spielberg’s *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial* (1982) at this point, it seems apposite to suggest that Wonka himself is being depicted as something of an alien (which Wonka seems to endorse when he greets the Golden Ticket winners: “Good morning, Starshine. The earth says ‘Hallo’”4).

Though Wonka appears obsessed with size – both his own and that of his factory – it is notable that Depp plays Wonka in a parodic, camp manner, making him quite asexual. There is also some irony in the fact that, though it was Stuart who retitled his version *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, it is in Burton’s that Wonka really moves centre stage, thanks to the backstory the director has provided for the chocolatier. Furthermore, while Burton certainly makes the Chocolate Factory more of a spectacle, it has also become a far more clinical environment, as we witness from the opening credits, where we descend into the depths of the cleanest chimney ever seen. Inside, too, it is a spotlessly controlled environment, as is evident from the particularly unappetising CGI chocolate – not looking at all “rich warm creamy” (p. 109) – being poured into moulds before being cut into bars then wrapped, sealed and boxed, all without human intervention (apart from a disembodied hand in a plum-coloured glove, inserting some Golden Tickets). We have lost many of those visual, aural and gustatory qualities – the “smoke and steam and delicious rich smells” (p. 114) – that make the book’s Chocolate Factory so attractive.

The genetically uniform Oompa-Loompas, too, themselves a product of special effects, add to the feeling that this Chocolate Factory is an artificial, lifeless space, making the presence of Oompa-Loompa children highly unlikely. The lack of tactile engagement with the comestibles is reinforced by the protective clothing the tribe wears: those purpose-designed, plastic-coated outfits. Of course, as we later learn, this is in line with Wonka’s obsession with protecting himself from contamination: his plum-coloured gloves, mentioned above, being a trademark feature, insulating him from the world while also preventing others from making physical contact with him. What we might call the stickiness of human relationships clearly repulses him – evident when Veruca Salt gives him a hug. It is not just physical contact, either, that he resists; for the mere thought of the word, “parents,” makes him gag.

Stuart’s Wonka, played by Gene Wilder, has none of these qualities, though he is unpredictable and, at times, paranoid and irascible. Moreover, perhaps because of its smaller budget, Stuart’s film more successfully renders the Chocolate Factory as a cosy, intimate space, one where the consumption of chocolate and candy seems more appealing. The cavernous, gothic spaces of Burton’s Chocolate Factory, in contrast, often convey a feeling of

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4 Although the intertext here is the musical *Hair*, and it is earthlings greeting the moon.
emptiness, giving the idea that this is not a place conducive to gorging one’s appetite: it is a more ascetic realm. It thus seems notable that, unlike Wilder’s Wonka, we never see Depp’s Wonka eat anything in his Chocolate Factory.5

If this loss of mischievous energy characterises Depp’s Wonka, it also seems true of the Oompa-Loompas in Burton’s film. For example, the “BUTTERSCOTCH AND BUTTERGIN” (p. 137) that we hear the tribe imbibing in the book (“They’re drunk as lords,” declares Wonka, p. 137) – which also feature in Stuart’s version (Wonka appositely quoting Ogden Nash’s epigrammatic verse, “Candy/ Is dandy./ But liquor/ Is quicker” [Nash, 1983, p. 3]) – are absent from Burton’s film. In contrast, Burton has decided to make more of such things as Dahl’s joke about whipped cream, explicitly showing a cow being held in a fetishistic harness, while we witness it being flogged with whips by some Oompa-Loompas. As elsewhere, some delectable confections have become associated with pain rather than pleasure.

The reasons for this, and for other changes made in the Burton film – particularly the backstory about Wonka’s relationship with his father – are certainly more explicable in terms of the intertextual history of this director’s oeuvre and his signature tropes. Thus, the detached quality of the Chocolate Factory brings to mind those cold suburbs depicted in Edward Scissorhands (1990), also starring Depp. Likewise, the fraught relationships between relatives, and fathers and sons especially, are familiar territory. The strong father figure, who is often also an absent, haunting presence, is there in Edward Scissorhands, in Batman (1989) and in Big Fish (2003). Such figures are then often contrasted with more fragile adult characters who remain childlike and, in some respects, ineffectual. Burton’s very first movie feature, Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure (1985), features just such a figure, as do, amongst others, Edward Scissorhands (1990) and Corpse Bride (2005), with Johnny Depp’s acting persona giving such winsome characters a particular sang-froid. The eponymous Scissorhands is the figure that is probably closest to Wonka in the way that Burton has depicted the latter, especially when we see the future chocolatier wearing the debilitating prosthetic device that not only helps straighten his teeth, but also inhibits his eating. It recalls the cruel appendages of Scissorhands (in fact, the scenes in which Wonka wields his giant scissors seems to reference Burton’s earlier film). Scissorhands, too, finds it difficult interacting with others (albeit for different reasons) and, of course, both he and Wonka, from their positions of splendid isolation, manage to create things of great beauty.

Given the prevalence of such fractured relationships in Burton’s work (either fraught father-son ones, or similar couplings of the powerful and powerless), his decision to have Depp play Wonka in such a foppish, affected manner starts to make more sense. There is that highly cultivated look, his sartorial elegance (in contrast to Wilder’s more clownlike apparel), that carefully coiffured hair and those perfect teeth, the latter being the result of wearing that medieval-looking orthodontic brace. The intertext here, obviously, is Michael Jackson, with his own synthetic look, a result of the extensive cosmetic surgery that the singer underwent. And other parallels then come to mind, too; for example, there is the fact that Jackson also invited children to visit him (at his ranch, named “Neverland,” which, like the Chocolate Factory, had its own fairground attractions) – and this provides a further intertextual link with the author of Neverland, J. M. Barrie, whom Depp had also played (in Finding Neverland,

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5 The latter munches on an edible cup in the Chocolate Room. Right at the end, we do see Burton’s Wonka preparing to eat dinner with the Buckets, but nothing is consumed; also, in flashbacks, the young Wonka is seen eating.
2004), while Freddie Highmore, who plays Charlie Bucket, acted alongside Depp as the original Peter Darling (forging another intimate, paternalistic relationship). Beyond that, we might recall Jackson’s own fraught relationship with his father, who humiliated Michael as a child, reputedly whipping him (Taraborrelli, 2009). This gives an extra intertextual resonance to that scene where we see the cow being whipped, especially as, like Wonka, it too is held in a restrictive harness.

Mention of all these intertextual references – whether to the patriarchal struggles so characteristic of Burton’s oeuvre, or to other cultural signifiers, such as Barrie and his tribe of lost boys or Jackson and Neverland – raises the question of an oedipal reading of Dahl’s tale, which Burton’s adaptation makes particularly alluring, given its subplot involving Wonka’s father. And then there is that statement, seemingly mouthing by Gene Wilder’s Wonka …

“almost everything you see is … oedipal

Burton’s reworking leads us to believe that Wonka’s strict dentist father, Wilbur (Christopher Lee), is the driving force behind Wonka’s decision to become a chocolatier. For, it is the father who prohibited young Willy from eating candies – metonymic of enjoyment in general – on the pretext that he was protecting his son’s flawless teeth (a bit like Peter Pan’s – Barrie, 1986/1911, p. 24). To ensure that his son obeys, Wonka senior effectively emasculates his son, making him wear a vicious, orthopaedic contraption that prevents Willy from biting. However, as in most such tales, the son rebels, ending up dedicating his life to the very thing that his father despises: candy. The castrating imagery deployed by the chocolatier is quite explicit in Burton’s version, as we see him transforming himself into the great patriarch, owner of the biggest Chocolate Factory in the world, giant chimneys and all, virilely wielding a huge machete and scissors (the latter forming an effective contrast with the small and delicate dental instruments of his father).

But their fraught relationship is most appositely captured in the model that Charlie constructs, fashioned out of “wonky” toothpaste-tube tops, of Wonka and his factory. This mise-en-scène exhibits not only the chocolatier’s fame, achievement and, tacitly, a rejection of his father and his values, but simultaneously, the materials from which it is made gesture towards Wonka senior’s profession. And, of course, such a tooth-decaying device as Wonka’s factory will ensure, if only unconsciously, the continued presence of his father.\(^6\)

If Burton has given Dahl’s tale a more oedipal twist, though, it is a flawed one, for the oedipal triangle lacks its third side. In the next section I shall explore what has become of the maternal presence but, for the present, let me consider the way that Burton has structured his tale. First, by considering Wonka’s simplistic solution to the question of filiation (“a hair,” as he jokingly expresses it, looking at his aging locks), then by looking at the resolution that Burton’s film enacts.

Wonka seems to think that he can simply import a successor to run his factory, just as he once obtained a biddable workforce for it. He presumes that Charlie will abandon his family with the same casual ease that Wonka forsook his own father. Of course, it is Wonka senior who established this pattern of behaviour by moving house, quite literally, when Willy runs

\(^6\) Dahl’s Wonka, without Burton’s subplot, does not need such motivation, creating “CAVITY-FILLING CARAMELS – NO MORE DENTISTS” (1995, p. 151).
away. Just as a troublesome tooth might be extracted, Wilbur physically uproots his dental practice from amidst a terrace of houses. Consequently, the chocolatier is left with a nagging psychological hole in his life.

Charlie, of course, insists that father and son be reconciled, family being more important than business – a view that is confirmed at the end, when the voiceover proclaims: “Charlie Bucket won a Chocolate Factory, but Willy Wonka has something even better: a family.” But, looked at more closely, it is a far from satisfactory resolution to the oedipal tensions between father and son.

Superficially, it appears a neat conclusion, with this final scene neatly bookending the film’s establishing shot, where the Bucket house is juxtaposed with the Chocolate Factory. The former is in the bottom, left-hand corner: what, in picture-book theory, is appositely known as the home space. In appearance it is also, both literally and metaphorically, an “open house.” That is, it has real holes in the roof and ceiling, but this also shows that, in the Bucket family, there are no secrets. It thus makes a powerful contrast with Wonka’s factory, which stands proud and erect in the top right-hand corner, which, again in picture-book terms, is regarded as the most insecure, tenuous spot. The latter certainly seems to look down on the Bucket property, which sags precipitously, suggesting that it is recoiling from Wonka’s imposing structure. The single, drooping chimney of the former is particularly evocative when contrasted with the huge thrusting chimneys of the Factory. But, as just noted, it is Wonka’s “home” that turns out to be the insecure place, with those nagging flashbacks eventually resulting in his family secrets being uncovered. Of course, in this powerful, opening mise-en-scène, such things are unknown. However, the warm lights of the Buckets’ house make a suggestive contrast with the darkness of Wonka’s Factory.

Let me now return to that bookending conclusion, where the camera gradually pulls back from the glowing interior of the Bucket household, to reveal that their house has now been relocated within the Factory, on the banks of the chocolate river. The psychological cavity – to use dental terminology – created by his father’s “extraction” now seems to have been “filled.” However, as I said before, this resolution is a confection only, masterminded, it would seem, by that master chocolatier in order to evade the real issues.

For, as with his workforce, Wonka has simply imported another family while neglecting his own. And, as the slow zoom out unfolds, we discover that the disembodied voiceover, present from the film’s beginning, emanates from Roy’s Oompa-Loompa. However, as we should also realise at this point, the voice is not the Oompa-Loompa’s own: it is that of Wonka’s father, making his absence the more poignant and haunting. Why, the question arises, isn’t Wilbur himself present, especially after we have witnessed their reconciliation (even if their embrace, both wearing gloves, is rather stiff). This ersatz conclusion is compounded when the snow, falling outside, is revealed to be another special effect created by Wonka (providing further intertextual allusion, this time to the less happy ending of Edward Scissorhands). It is simply icing sugar (or something similar), drizzling over the Bucket house, which seems to confirm our feeling that this is little more than another of the chocolatier’s spectacular confections. Life might be “sweeter” for Charlie, but it is of a very saccharine nature, given that, while the Buckets dine, the house of Wonka senior is still out in the cold, in the real snow, along with “papa” himself. As I said earlier, it is a move that parallels Wonka’s

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7 Despite sounding like Christopher Lee, though, the voiceover is actually performed by Geoffrey Holder.
sacking of his original workers (in the films, Grandpa Joe being one of them) and replacing them with cheap migrant labour (illegally imported labour, actually).

In this section, then, it has been argued that there is an oedipal struggle of sorts between Willy and Wilbur, but it is one that is flawed in two regards: on the one hand, it is not satisfactorily resolved and, on the other, it lacks that crucial third element of the oedipal triangle: the mother figure. For, as Freud interpreted the myth, while the males certainly struggle and compete, it is as a result of the female, with whom they wish to bond, whether maternally or erotically.

**Markers of Femininity, or, “almost everything you see is … edible”**

I have already made the observation that the Chocolate Factory itself seems to be coded as more of a feminine space. But I would contend that, in Burton’s adaptation, this space has been further restricted. To open out this discussion, I will draw on two related concepts from the psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva: the semiotic and the abject.

The semiotic is concerned with the roots of language, before it becomes an interpersonal, rule-bound (i.e. grammatical) method of communication (known as the “symbolic”) (Kristeva, 1980). The semiotic is more concerned with prosody, with such things as the mother’s vocal sounds – with onomatopoeia, with cooing and singing, and with the rhythms and repetitions of the maternal body: heartbeat, pulse, the cadence of voice. Predictably, these early forms of communication are seen as feminine, as opposed to the symbolic’s association with the law of the father, with patriarchy.

In the novel, then, there is great emphasis on the semiotic side of language: in the sounds of the various products, like the “Whipple-scrumptious Fudgemallow Delight” (Dahl, 1995, p. 43) and in the way such sounds are presented typographically, using capital letters, emboldening, italics and exclamation marks as visual indicators of their verbal impact, let alone making the words more corporeal in appearance: “In the town itself, actually within sight of the house … there was an ENORMOUS CHOCOLATE FACTORY!” (p. 17). These markers more readily invoke a sense of voice, too, with capitals and exclamation marks suggesting an increase in volume. Onomatopoeia also boosts the aural impact of the sounds involved: Augustus Gloop going “WHOOF!” (p. 100) up the pipe like a bullet, while pipes themselves are heard “suck-suck-sucking” (p. 89) and machines go “phut-phut-phut-phut-phut” (p. 114) (cf. Rudd, 2012). Finally, of course, we have those rhyming-couplets sung by the Oompa-Loompas.

Stuart’s adaptation seems to celebrate these qualities, making more of the Wonka product names, such as the “Triple Cream Cup”, “Squelchy Snorter”, “Sizzler”, and “Scrumdidlyumptious Bar” (all mentioned in Bill’s Candy Shop). The film also features more singing by the characters, including Bill, Charlie’s mother, Grandpa Joe, Wonka himself, and Veruca Salt, aside from the four songs from the Oompa-Loompas (in Burton’s version, it is only the tribesmen and puppets that sing). Moreover, in Stuart’s version, the Oompa-Loompas don’t just sing the songs: the materiality of their language is also stressed, with words appearing on screen in unorthodox orthography, in garish shapes and colours.

Let me now turn to Kristeva’s second concept of relevance, the abject, which gestures towards that space between subject and object, where the division between “you” and “not-you,” is lost. Kristeva traces the abject back to our earliest development, when we first distinguish ourselves from the mother by a process of abjection; that is, by forming a separate
self, an identity apart from the maternal body to which we’ve formerly been united, whether in the womb or at the breast (when, indeed, the mother was edible). The abject is, therefore, that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (1984, p. 4), since, after this early period of union, the abject can only reinvoke that sense of losing oneself: of being reabsorbed by the mother. Kristeva lists various substances that can invoke this fear of loss, many of which are associated with the maternal and her caring functions, such as milk, drool, sick, shit, piss. But a feeling of abjection can also be triggered by anything that reminds us that our exterior is porous, so it includes such things as tears, snot and saliva, let alone sweets that you can “SUCK […] AND […] SPIT IN SIX DIFFERENT COLOURS” (151). Any sticky, tactile substances, in fact, have this ambivalence, being intensely satisfying, like chocolate, but also, potentially, disgusting (e.g. “a spout with brown sticky stuff oozing out,” p. 154). The latter is clearly seen with Gloop who, turd-like, “Goes up the Pipe,” as the chapter title foretells readers, becoming temporarily wedged before heading for the “big chocolate-mixing barrel,” thence to be “poured into the fudge boiler” (p. 103).

Like Gloop and, earlier, Pondicherry, all the prize-winning children except Charlie have similar experiences of the abject, having sought to indulge themselves too immersively in what they desire, such that their whole sense of identity collapses and they lose their distinctive, individual coordinates. As Kristeva puts it, the abject is “the place where meaning collapses” (1984, p. 2), being somewhere “I am not” (p. 3). Certainly, of these three versions, Burton’s shows the characters being minimally changed. Thus, whereas in Dahl’s novel, Gloop becomes “thinner as a straw!” (p. 182), Burton’s has him as gross as ever, and still preoccupied with chocolate, licking it off his body (Stuart’s version, it should be said, omits this scene; we are only given Wonka’s assurances that the children might be “a little bit wiser for the wear,” playing on the phrase, “worse for wear”).

Generally, then, I’d contend that Burton’s version renders the abject in a more sanitised manner, aided by the gloss of CGI. This shift is apparent from the outset: while both adaptations start with a Wonka bar being prepared, Stuart’s fills the screen with its natural ingredients, whereas Burton’s concentrates on the technology. Also, in Stuart’s version, there is that bizarre, journey on board the Wonkatania, where we are presented with such disturbing things as a centipede crawling across someone’s mouth and a chicken being beheaded. It is no wonder that Mrs Teavee declares, “Now I am going to be sick.”

These images are not from Dahl’s book, and nor are other abject scenes that Stuart has introduced, like the Wonkamobile, for instance, powered by fizzy drinks (e.g. “double-bubble burp-a-cola”), which immediately starts leaking and coating its passengers with sticky, carbonated liquid. The drinks do feature elsewhere in Dahl’s tale, though, and Stuart makes

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8 I have not the time to pursue it here, but it is worth emphasising that in certain discussions of the “abject,” the female is further derogated, becoming the “monstrous feminine” (Creed, 1993); whereas, for Kristeva, the abject invokes not the mother herself, but the process of separating from her.

9 Hamida Bosmajian (1985, p. 37) covers some aspects of this, seeing the factory as a “great digestive system” that deals with both consumption and excretion. But her reading generally goes elsewhere, arguing that the novel provides an “excremental vision,” projecting “the meanings and problems of an acquisitive consumer society” (p. 47).
much of the “FIZZY LIFTING DRINKS” scene, emphasising the physicality of Grandpa and Charlie as we watch them fly, swim and summersault before, in order to avoid being kibbled, they each manage “a great big long rude burp” (p. 134). Other abject elements from the book likewise feature in Stuart’s film, such as the lickable wallpaper, available in various flavours, including “snozzberry.” When it comes to Burton’s film, however, the most abject scenes occur away from the Chocolate Factory: the first, involving Pondicherry, has already been mentioned; the second occurs in Loompaland, where Wonka has to consume a bowl of mashed up caterpillars.

Let me mention one final, abject element of significance, though Stuart did not find it in Dahl’s novel. This is the scene where the prize-winners are trapped in a very constricted, almost claustrophobic space, prior to their entry to the Chocolate Room (Burton, too, alludes to Stuart’s scene). Whether deliberate or not, Stuart’s imagery is reminiscent of Alice from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865), where she too struggles to wriggle through a tiny door, evoking notions of the birthing process. In each case, these struggles precede the characters’ gaining access to beautiful gardens, which, in both Carroll’s and Dahl’s texts, turn out to be spaces that are less than idyllic. Stuart then caps this intertextual link by having Wonka sing about “paradise” and “magic lands,” through which his Edenic chocolate river flows. However, temptation, let alone Slugworth, is always ready to strike.

Conclusion

This last example of textual mutation, like those that preceded it, should have demonstrated the flexibility and subtlety of Stam’s way of approaching adaptation. We can see exactly what a text is seeking to adapt itself from, and to.

In terms of racism, we saw a decisive attempt by Stuart to rid the Oompa-Loompas of their associations with African pygmies, although they remain deferential and are, inescapably, a subjected people. Burton has a very different solution, celebrating ethnicity through the person of Deep Roy, and parodying the notion of a great white hunter liberating a benighted population. Once again, however, although Roy’s versatility confounds simplistic notions of stereotyping, it is still the case that the Oompa-Loompas are not as capable of running Wonka’s factory themselves.

Aside from this, though, I have suggested that, because the Oompa-Loompas are solely male in both films, they are a doomed race. Such a marginalisation of the female brings me on to my central argument, that the feminine has generally become side-lined over the course of these adaptations. In fact, this process of marginalisation began even earlier, before Dahl’s novel was published, as earlier drafts show Wonka with a wife and son, and Charlie being escorted to the factory by his mother (Keyser, 2017).

Stuart, for reasons unknown, does give Charlie’s mother a higher profile, but only by removing Charlie’s father, making it a one-parent family (albeit rich in grandparents). Even more inexplicably, Burton’s Wonka also seems to come from a one-parent family, but in his case, it is as though his mother never existed. This becomes most explicit in the scene where Wonka gags over the word “parents.” He initially responds with “dad,” but as “parents” demands a plural response, Wonka adds “papa,” a word closer in sound, if nothing else, to “mama.” From the flashbacks, it would seem that she does not even exist in his unconscious. Certainly, when Wonka returns to his father’s house and Charlie examines the photographs
on the walls, although we see one of the young Willie, there is no trace of any Mrs Wonka on display. It is as though Willy was fathered by male parthenogenesis, just as Burton’s all-male Oompa-Loompas give the impression that they might have been cloned.

I suggested earlier that the father-son rivalry in Burton’s adaptation has oedipal overtones, but, as I also pointed out, such a family tussle requires a mother/lover figure, and she is singularly absent. However, as I have also argued, chocolate seems to figure as a maternal substitute. And, in earlier versions of the tale, the factory is more clearly coded as feminine. It is in Burton’s version that the semiotic, abject power of the factory has been most dramatically downplayed. Its “thick gooey” substances (p. 116), “sloshing and splashing” liquids (p. 118) and machines that suck and belch, seem to have been tamed thanks to the technological hardware and ubiquitous protective clothing, let alone the more extensive use of that insulating lift. And all this is aside from the other ways that the feminine has been downplayed. Most notably, by both directors making the Oompa-Loompas into a male-only race and, in Burton’s case, by making Wonka seem to be a product solely of his father’s loins.

Given though, that texts mutate over time, as Stam says, to deal with changing cultural circumstances, it would not seem too difficult to conceive a more feminine-friendly version of the film in the future, especially as it was initially conceived in these terms. While some might argue that I am making too much out of what is “only a children’s book/film,” it perhaps needs reiterating that such texts are, in common with other seemingly innocuous things, like sweets and confections, quite capable of sticking in one’s teeth, or in one’s craw, and having long-term effects. Of such things is ideology made.

References


