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 **Media Adaptations of Children's Literature: The Brave New Genre**

John Daniel Stahl

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Media Adaptations of Children's Literature:  
The Brave New Genre**

*John Daniel Stahl (bio)*

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"Poetry is that which gets lost in translation."

—attributed to Robert Frost

The special demand which we as literary critics tend to make of media adaptations of literary works is that they be "faithful" to the originals, at least in spirit and in mood if not in detail. The phrase frequently used is "scrupulously faithful." It is certainly painful for someone who agrees with Elizabeth Segal that "The Little House" books by Laura Ingalls Wilder are valuable as an honest assessment of pioneer life to read the following:<sup>1</sup>

**[End Page 5]**

'Fast-Food' Enterprise Disrupts Prairie Peace. 8 p.m. *Little House on the Prairie*. A fast-talking salesman convinces Mrs. Oleson she can become rich by converting her family restaurant into a 'fast-food' franchise, but when her success threatens to wreck the home life of Charles Ingalls and Nels Oleson, they set out to ruin business at the new eatery.

(*The Hartford Courant*, Monday, December 7, 1981, D9).

The TV series, "remotely" based on Wilder, as Segal suggests, violates the spirit of the original in various ways, not least through the gender roles portrayed and by the infusion of a form of competition characteristic of contemporary urban society, not of the 19th-century American frontier. The television industry has remade an American children's classic in its own image.<sup>2</sup> Also lost in the process are the lucid beauty and the accuracy of observation so characteristic of Wilder's writing. It is easy for us as literary critics to decry these depredations which accompany the adaptation of a work of children's literature to the media.

But there is another special demand which we ought to make equally of media adaptations of literary works for children, and which ought in fact to take precedence when we have to choose between the two criteria. This demand is that the adaptation employ the artistic

character and potential of its medium as fully as possible. This means that we must judge adaptations as integral artistic expressions: a children's film as film, a children's television show as television, a children's sound recording as sound recording, not just (or perhaps not at all) as a mutant offspring of literature. The filmstrip is an example of a medium in which the desire to adapt literary works for children has trampled down respect for the artistic potentialities of the medium. Probably the filmstrip is too limited a medium to become a "legitimate art form" as film has, but it does demand and benefit from the kind of close critical attention which Ethel Heins gave it in her survey of the waste-land of filmstrip adaptations of the children's stories and poems.<sup>3</sup>

It should be self-evident that thorough, intelligent assessment of film and other media as art requires knowledge of and respect for the medium involved. Film and television criticism, the basis of "visual literacy," assumes knowledge of the visual media, an expertise in which many literary critics, myself among them, are deficient. Here is a case where the much-vaunted interdisciplinary approach is not only desirable but necessary. As critics of children's literature in the media, we need greater familiarity with the intrinsic characteristics and possibilities of the media themselves.

The term "visual literacy," the stated goal of many interdisciplinary language arts teaching efforts, is itself something of an anachronism. It is potentially misleading because it carries over to the discussion of other media the implication that critical appreciation of works in these media consists of a form of reading, only transposed to a new, "visual" realm. I don't have a satisfactory term to substitute for "visual literacy" yet, and certainly a "literate" approach can accomplish a great deal. But something more is possible and ultimately required.

Filmmakers and other media artists with sensitivity and respect for the literary texts they are working with, as well as children's book authors whose works have been adapted to an audio-visual medium, emphasize repeatedly how intrinsically different that medium is from the literary work. Each has its own forms and requirements. Morton Schindel...

out over reading it. While *Once Upon a Classic* was beginning its second year I was working with the Indianapolis PBS station on a project. The program director informed me that this series was not highly rated by children, but "has been followed mainly by people over thirty. Is it a part of children's literature? Or is it a manipulation of favorite book titles remembered by adults? If the series-length programs based upon books are not the same as the books, how do they differ? Jane Fowler argues for change in story when he stated that the scripts of a visual representation should not be a version of the book, but "a version faithful to the very different production capability (and relation with audience) . . ."<sup>1</sup> While we do argue for artistic license in the visual representations, we also need to acknowledge that there are some audio-visual representations which we expect to remain true to the original book format or text title.

Filmstrips and recordings were not created to fill a void in entertainment, nor to fill a need within educational and library programming. They were designed to introduce children to books or tales when the professional either wishes for a larger scale format or feels inadequate in doing the presentation himself. As such, they depend upon the discernment of children long used by the book genre. They do not provide a reinterpretation of the text, but simply an extension of format. They are, therefore, designed to reproduce exactly an already successful tale or reading experience. They probably deserve the least attention from the critic since they are not directly involved in the creation process.

This *Quarterly* contains several contributions which add dimension to the field of criticism about the visual arts within children's literature. Film is dealt with at greatest length. Its quality contributions within the field far outweigh those of all other visual representations except picture books and the performing arts. *QJL* deserves a good deal of serious discussion. The diversity in experience and knowledge which is reflected by the articles included sug-

gests that film is now significant and an already established area in the field. Television has been discussed not in terms of literature adaptations. Since ABC's "after school specials" did not begin until 1972, the area of television adaptations is new ground for both producers and critics. We hope that the analysis of *Once Upon a Classic* will encourage others to look critically at television and its visual representations. Whatever the ultimate outcome, however, this issue is a steppingstone in the process of criticism of children's audio-visual materials.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>White, Glenn. *Children's books and their illustrations*. London: The School Wings number of The Studio, 1957-1968, 7-8.

<sup>2</sup>Rowe, John. "From to Media: The First Children's Movie". *The New York Times*, "The Joy of Making a Superhero New Film," *News*, November 1981, 271.

<sup>3</sup>Alsch, Pamela M. "Children's Television and the Modeling of Reading Habits," *Education and Urban Society*, November 1977, 88-89.

<sup>4</sup>For a lengthy examination of one example, read "How or Not to Teach: Media and Children's Literature," *Language Arts*, April 1979, 173-179.

<sup>5</sup>Pross, Rosemary Lee. "Is Children's Programming in peril?" *Teacher*, March 1979, 42.

<sup>6</sup>Rowe, *ibid.*, 219.

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Francis Mortoft: His Book, Being His Travels Through France and Italy 1658-1659, as noted by Theodor Adorno, the lens attracts a tertiary object.

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Bryan the brave: A second grader's growth as reader and writer, the movement of the rotor actively

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