Willy Versus Charlie: The Culture-Bending Oompa-Loompa

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**Keywords:** Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Oompa-Loompas, *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, representation

A spectator will always approach a film adapted from a novel with great caution. There is always a fear that core elements of the novel, scenes readers identify with, will be absent from the film or that the film plot deviates from the original storyline. What audiences fail to realize that there is a cultural and historical context that contributes to the shaping and production of the film. In preparation for the film adaptation of Roald Dahl’s novel, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the director, Mel Stuart, and production team evaluate the demands of the cultural market the film is sent into. Due to the political activism of the NAACP and Civil Rights Movement, the director redesigns the Oompa-Loompas to better appeal to the audience, removing any trace of “blackness” or “African American” from the film. The characters, Oompa-Loompas, had their physical appearances and character backgrounds are modified to shift away from any racial stereotyping and the film was renamed as *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971). Unlike the conflicts and pressures directed towards Mel Stuart, Tim Burton, director of the 2005 remake, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, openly embraces his cultural surroundings incorporating twenty-first century technologies and openness towards depicting different races on screen by casting an Indian-American as his Oompa-Loompa. The film also references the new economic trends towards outsourcing workers in the United States economy and the aftermath causing dislocations of American workers. The Oompa-Loompa is reformatted in each adaptation to best cater to the cultural context it inhabits.
The original Oompa-Loompas of Roald Dahl’s novel were heavily criticized for their similarities to African Americans and the slave trade. In Roald Dahl’s novel, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1963), the Oompa-Loompas are “pygmies…imported direct from Africa” (Sturrock 493). “Their skin is almost black” and they once lived in the depths of jungles surrounded by many dangerous creatures (Dahl 74). Dahl’s Oompa-Loompas were imported to the factory in “large packing cases with holes in them” and, in exchange for their work, were given all the chocolate and cacao (a play on the word cocoa) beans, an amount never truly specified (Dahl 61-62). The entire tribe, after leaving the jungle, works within the factory and has never ventured outside of Wonka’s domain. The Oompa-Loompas are a group of people who live within “tribes” in a foreign domain considered far less advanced than the cultured United States (comparable to Wonka’s industrialism). In the novel, they appear not to speak English, and instead their own primitive language. Willy Wonka speaks with to them in their language to better strike a deal for their services in exchange for cacao beans. The tribes dined on a variety of bugs and other primitive foods; “And they were living on green caterpillars, and the caterpillars tasted revolting…” (Dahl 51). The rare food they savored and craved for was the cacao bean, the very bean that Mr. Wonka uses to create his chocolate from, and to persuade the little people to come back to his factory (Dahl 51). The lack of refined diet, inability to communicate in English, attire that was little more than skins, and enemies, creates a standard lower than that of the intelligent Willy Wonka.

The fate of the Oompa-Loompas mirrors the journey of the African Americans who were captured as part of the slave trade within the United States. There are slight discrepancies

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1 Let it be said that after harsh criticism towards Dahl on this very point the novel underwent revision. Their new origin is Loompaland and they were never referenced as “dark skinned” again. The new version of the novel was released in 1973 in the United States.
between the African Americans and the Oompa-Loompas themselves. One major discrepancy is
the reward each partied receives for their work. The African American slaves received basic food
and shelter while the Oompa Loompas worked for cacao beans. The cacao beans were a
payment contracted between Willy Wonka and the Oompa Loompas, something both parties
agreed and negotiated upon. The African Americans, however, were not promised anything in
exchange for their slavery, but both people share the a master-slave relationship. The Oompa-
Loompas were also guaranteed shelter within the factory. While a factory does not equate to a
home, it is a guaranteed shelter that pairs with their source of income, being the cocoa beans. The
African American slaves were given minimal resources to ensure they could live for another day
of hard labor. The Oompa-Loompas also came willingly to Willy Wonka; in their own native
land the little people faced many wild animals and threats from nature. While some slaves were
stolen from warring tribes, the Oompa-Loompas view of their new white master was a sign of
salvation, versus the African Americans who viewed their slavery as just that, enslavement.
Regardless of the minor discrepancies, the parallel between Oompa-Loompa and enslaved
African American peaked the attention of many political groups when it was announced a film
adaptation was in progress.

The pertinence of the Civil Rights movement, promoting a positive image of the African
American community, requires a character and story reconstruction of the Oompa-Loompa.
The film’s production was span across 1970, the start of a new decade. The 1960s were a time of
great political activism on behalf of African Americans within the United States. The 24th
Amendment was ratified in 1964 outlawing the Poll Tax prohibiting African Americans from
voting. The following year the 1965 Voting Right Act outlawed the literacy test, “The legislative
hearings showed that the Department of Justice's efforts to eliminate discriminatory election
practices by litigation” (justice.gov). These two political acts meant the removal of racial discrimination within the United States. The Civil Rights Movement remains active for over two decades, but comes to a close with the end of the sixties, but although the movement is ending, the Civil Rights movement had a great influential power over the pre-production of the film. It would have been a conflict of interests for a film hoping to turn profit in the box office to portray African Americans in anything other than a positive light.

Due to the dark skin of the Oompa-Loompas multiple political groups pressured director Mel Stuart to make changes to the *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (1971)* film adaptation. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) openly ridiculed writer Roald Dahl for racism in relation to the Oompa-Loompas. Since “the mission of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination”, the comparison of Oompa Loompas to African American slaves jeopardizes social equality within the United States (naacp.org). Thus the NAACP thought it was in their best interest to insist Stuart make a change to the film before production. It was never Dahl’s intention to be racist, and the entire ordeal caught him by surprise (Sturrock, 493). What shocked the writer even more was the “ferocity of the social tide that eddied around almost every public project within the United States at the tie” (Sturrock 493). The NAACP was not the only political group active during the sixties that felt his novel was racist. The Black Panther Party, known as one of the most influential political groups of American History, also found the novel to be racist. The Black Panther Party had a similar mission to the NAACP, to protect the African American people from racial stereotyping and brutality. To these two parties, the “Oompa-Loompas seemed clearly to reinforce a stereotype of slavery that American blacks were trying to
overcome” (Sturrock 493). Parties threatened to picket any theatre that used the word “Chocolate” in its name, thus the 1971 film was changed to Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory to avoid any other racial undertones and any reference it had to the original book (Sturrock 493). The political significance of these two parties led director Mel Stuart to make significant changes to his upcoming film.

To avoid the same negative reaction Dahl’s novel received, Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (1971) redesigned the Oompa-Loompa characters as genderless beings with no ethnic references in their physical appearances. Their first on screen appearance depicts the Oompa-Loompas as strange men with green hair, orange faces, and white factory overall uniforms. While the actors are different in size, shape, and stature, (five actors play the Oompa Loompas) none give off the distinct appearance of a darker skinned man the directors hoped to avoid. In fact, the orange skin avoids any reference or resemblance of any human ethnicity. These Oompa-Loompa men are not uncivilized men either; they are dressed alike and professionally for their jobs. This is a complete change from the Oompa-Loompas of the novel depicted in merely animal skins for clothing. The Oompa-Loompas sing in perfect English; I mention this point because there is no debilitating accent that might reference an African American origin or ethnic background. Willy Wonka, played by Gene Wilder, explains that his Oompa-Loompas were rescued from the fictional Loompaland. Mike Teevee, one of the young boys granted a tour of the factory, has a mother who is a history teacher. She does not believe these little people originate from a country that does not exist, and demands an explanation. Wonka’s reply is quick and ridiculous:

Wonka
Oh, well then you know all about it and what a terrible country it is. Nothing but desolate wastes and fierce beasts. And the poor little Oompa-Loompas were so small and helpless; they would get gobbled up right and left. A Wangdoodle would eat ten of them for breakfast and think nothing of it. And so, I said, "Come and live with me in peace and safety, away from all the Wangdoodles and Hornswogglers and Snozzwangers and rotten Vermicious Knids.

(Wilder “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory”)

Wonka’s explanation is so far confusing and ridiculous that the children and parents alike do not know whether or not to believe the existence of Loompaland. Creatures such as “wangdoodle” or “hornswogglers” are obviously not common to the world the five children and their families inhabit. Due to the enigmatic personality of Willy Wonka, the madness of his tale is tolerated and accepted by the group of visitors. Needless as to whether or not the tale is true, the new Oompa-Loompas are in no way comparable to the controversial “dark skinned’ Oompa-Loompas of the original novel.

Tim Burton’s film adaptation of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) was free of the pressures of its counterpart’s cultural context. Instead, Burton’s version was able to embrace the technological advances of the twenty-first century and positive cultural openness towards different races. This century introduced a new set of film-related technologies that brought forth an entirely new shaping of the Oompa-Loompa. Although the new-reprinted versions of *Charlie
and the Chocolate Factory novel called for the Oompa-Loompas to be little white men with outrageous hair, this new version from the novel was not depicted in the film. Deep Roy was cast as the primary actor to depict the Oompa-Loompa. Instead of individual actors for each Oompa Loompas, Deep Roy played all one hundred sixty five Oompa Loompas. While standing already at the short height of four-feet four-inches, Burton had Deep Roy’s height digitally shrunk to thirty inches for the film (Nashawaty “The Truth About Charlie”). To help replicate the one actor, split screen photography, along with various digital and front projection effects, allowed the screen to be divided into various sections, typically in two. But for this film the screen was divided into multiple sections, anywhere from four to eight. In addition to this split screen photography, “… state-of-the-art photo-realistic and animatronic Oompas were modeled from Roy to supplement the action and serve as physical focal points in the scenes” (chocolatefactorymovie.com). The additional Oompa-Loompas helped keep spacing and image continuity as special effects were added in post-production. Tim Burton embraced the cultural around him by utilizing the new film technologies.

Beyond the technological advances, the Oompa-Loompas are elevated to a new level of importance and intelligence in the 2005 film. These Oompa-Loompas are no longer just labor workers who fix and mix chocolate as they did in the 1971 film. The narrator of the film, an unseen voice that progresses the story forward, is one of Wonka’s Oompa-Loompas. While this fact is only revealed with the closing scene of the film, the Oompa-Loompa shows great insight in relation to of the other human characters, such as the bratty children. The narrator announces which scenes are flashbacks, carefully guiding the audience through the non-linear timeline of the film. Unlike the 1971 Oompa-Loompas, Deep Roy’s character is given more than unskilled labor tasks. One of the Oompa-Loompa’ even acts as Willy Wonka’s personal psychiatrist, his
professionalism expressed with a nod of the head and not a single word. While the Oompa-Loompas have their own spoken language, they are portrayed as extremely capable and able to understand English, specifically Wonka’s unique words and speech. As Willy Wonka tours the factory the glass elevator stops in many different rooms, including the accounting room, television room, and inventing room where the Oompa-Loompas are given jobs far superior to the middle class white worker such as creating a machine similar to a teleportation machine. The Oompa-Loompa is the ideal worker because he is versatile in all areas of the factory and works at a lower wage than the original white worker; the Oompa-Loompa does not require fiscal dollars and is devoted to Wonka’s factory.

Outsourcing has become the common economic trend for United States and is translated into the film through Wonka’s explanation of the business deal struck between the chief of the Oompa-Loompas. Outsourcing involves obtaining goods or services from outside suppliers. These outside suppliers have a common trend of being paid lower wages for longer amounts of work. These lower wagers have “led to considerable anxiety in some segments of the U.S. workforce that feel vulnerable to competition from well-educated workers abroad willing to work for, in some cases, one-tenth of the wages paid to Americans” (Otterman “Trade”). These low wages can be comparable to the Oompa-Loompa that works for the cacao bean versus the white worker (like Uncle Joe) who requires money. The Oompa-Loompas eat, live, and breathe inside of the Wonka factory. The audience and characters alike never see workers leave the factory (even if the posters advertising Wonka’s competition involve workers leaving the factory it occurs at night and still no one sees it). Willy Wonka has an entire workforce at his fingertips with entire loyalty due to their love of the cacao bean. To add to the appeal of these outsourced employees, the Oompa-Loompas are highly intelligence and capable beings. While not
elaborated upon in the film, both Charlie’s grandfather and father are factory workers. The common factory worker, more times than not, is not an individual holding a higher-degree of education. Furthermore, Charlie’s father is ultimately fired from his own job because a machine is more efficient at the job than a human is.

This Oompa-Loompa of the 2005 Charlie and the Chocolate Factory references the current economic practices of the United States. The Oompa-Loompas embody the current trend of outsourcing in the United States. Outsourcing involves obtaining goods or services from outside suppliers. Within the film, the Oompa-Loompa workers remain unseen by the general public. The only thing the citizens of the city see “come out of the factory is the candy” (David Charlie and the Chocolate Factory). Outsourcing jobs in the United States is a common trend for factories and large companies. There are two major drawbacks to outsourcing: “It leads to layoffs and dislocations of thousands of U.S. workers (Otterman “Trade: Outsourcing Jobs”). Dislocation is considered a disturbance in a usual place or state; the dislocation of workers is a feeling of loss of purpose, and the loss of employment leads to a physical dislocation from one’s original home at times, to a smaller living location. Mr. Wonka issues layoffs to his entire human workforce, including Grandpa Joe, when he finds that workers are selling his secret recipes to competitors on the market. Wonka is unable to trust the average white worker. Grandpa Joe can be considered a victim of dislocation; his family lives in a small slanted shack on the outskirts of town. Another reference to white men losing their jobs due to outsourcing could be Charlie’s father. Mr. Bucket originally worked in a toothpaste factory screwing the tops onto toothpaste. It is an unskilled job and he too is replaced by something that works efficiently and without distrust, a machine. These two economic trends are contemporary elements that Tim Burton chooses to incorporate into his film by replacing the humans with Oompa-Loompa workers. The
actor Deep Roy was born in Nairobi, Kenya to Indian Parents (Brummer “Deep Roy”). As a man of Indian decent, he can be seen as an outsider, brought in that causes dislocation and layoffs. There is a growing preference for lower-waged workers that do not originate within the company, same for Willy Wonka who fires all of his human workers. It could be that the 2005 Oompa-Loompa is meant to critique the current society in which we live in.

While Tim Burton’s 2005 film adapts and encompasses the cultural context through technological advances and commentary on economic trends, Mel Stuart’s 1971 film avoids its cultural context by drawing no references or similarities. The Oompa-Loompa of the 1971 film protects itself by deviating as far from its historical time as possible that would cause spectators to view the film as racist towards African Americans. The Oompa-Loompa is given modern clothing as a factory worker and in return is given an orange face and green hair to provide for an ethnic-less character. These Oompa-Loompa references history by protecting history; it protects the African Americans who made great stride in the Civil Right Movement in the 60’s into the 70’s. The 2005 Oompa-Loompa embraces its cultural history, both in technology and economically. On the technical side, only one actor was needed to portray the Oompa-Loompas; film technology allowed for the replication of a single actor to create a work force of one hundred twenty-six identical Oompa-Loompas marketing one type of people. The actor was also digitally shrunk down to thirty inches, further emphasizing the changes in cinematic technology. This Oompa-Loompa played by Deep Roy also references the economic changes of the United States with the reliance on outsourcing; “Boston-based consultancy Forrester estimates that 400,000 service jobs have been lost to off-shoring since 2000, with jobs leaving at a rate of
12,000 to 15,000 per month, says John McCarthy, the company's director of research” (Ottermann “Trade”). Deep Roy, as an Oompa-Loompa, wears no makeup to hide or masquerade his ethnic heritage. Instead, he is meant to depict the workers used in outsourcing. He as an Oompa-Loompa replaces an entire white-populated workforce through layoffs, such as the Button family, suffers from layoffs and dislocation.

Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* has undergone revisions through various mediums. The original novel underwent revisions in 1971 after pressure and harsh criticism from the NAACP. The organization continued its pressure when the novel was first adapted into a film in by director Mel Stuart. The film was forced to change titles to *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) to avoid any reference to the original “racist” novel. The Oompa-Loompa character underwent major changes both in character background story and appearance. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) revealed a completely different Oompa Loompa more relevant to the contemporary era while returning to the roots of the novel by clearly depicting Wonka’s journey to Loompaland and asking the “tribe” to work for him in exchange for Cacao Beans. The film did embrace were the technological advances of the time through cgi (computer generated images). The casting of Deep Roy can be equated to his ethnic background of African American and Indian. The ethnic background harks to the economic shift in the United States concerning outsourcing. The Oompa-Loompa is a transitive character that best adapts to the time period but remains iconic in the world of moviegoers for their dance routines and hilarious song.
Works Cited


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