

THE STOLEN FAIRY DUST: AN ANALYSIS OF THE AMERICAN FILM ADAPTATIONS OF *PETER PAN*

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Título: «El polvo de hadas robado: Un análisis de las adaptaciones de *Peter Pan* en el cine americano»

Resumen: Este trabajo tiene por objeto realizar un estudio comparativo entre *Peter Pan* del autor escocés J.M. Barrie y su posterior conversión al cine. Para ello, analizamos el proceso de adaptación en cuatro películas que, además de ser bien conocidas por el público, comparten la característica de haber sido producidas por estudios de cine americanos. Ateniéndonos al carácter original de la obra, adoptaremos un enfoque que nos permita reconocer las similitudes y diferencias entre el texto literario y el texto fílmico. Así pues, observaremos cómo, a través de sus numerosas recreaciones, la industria de Hollywood se ha apropiado de un relato mítico de la literatura inglesa y lo ha convertido en un producto «made in U.S.A.».

Palabras clave: J.M. Barrie – cine – adaptación – derechos de autor – W. Disney – S. Spielberg

Abstract: This paper aims to conduct a comparative study between *Peter Pan* by the Scottish author J.M. Barrie and its subsequent conversion into film. To do this, we analyse the process of adaptation in four films which, besides being well known by the public, share the characteristic of having been produced by American film studios. Guided by the original character of the work, we will adopt an approach that allows us to recognise the similarities

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and differences between the literary text and the filmic text. Thus, we will see how, through its numerous re-creations, Hollywood industry has appropriated a mythical tale of English literature and has turned it into a typical American product.

Keywords: J.M. Barrie – cinema – adaptation – copyright – W. Disney – S. Spielberg

1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20th century, people around the world witnessed the birth of a new contemporary myth. For the first time, the long cherished wish of humanity to never grow up and remain a child forever was put into writing. Thus, *Peter Pan* became an unprecedented phenomenon. Here J.M. Barrie tells the story of three London children who, accompanied by a marvellous boy, travel to a land where they live numerous adventures. Like the children in the story, people could experience the delight of childhood by digging into their deepest memories. Thus, due to his capacity to touch the hearts of so many people, Barrie achieved the category of mythmaker. The story of Peter Pan was first presented on the stage and, following its huge success, it took the form of a novel. Since then, many artistic disciplines have taken inspiration from it – among them, cinema.

At a meeting in 1921, Barrie and Charlie Chaplin toyed with the idea of making a film of *Peter Pan*. The famous actor declared «it has even greater possibilities as a film than a play» (Tatar, 2011: 319). Although it was originally written for the stage, along the years the story of the eternal boy proved to be much more productive on the screen. By the turn of the 20th century, the evolution of cinema gave birth to a new industry. America was the land where the major film studios were located. So it is not surprising that, since the moment *Peter Pan* was regarded as a theatrical success, Barrie received numerous offers across the Atlantic to bring the story to the new medium. Along the first one hundred years of Peter Pan, there have been many attempts to re-imagine his adventures in film. However, only a few were finally made. This paper aims to analyse the four major adaptations of the classic story: from silent cinema to modern cinema. These four pictures share the fact of having been produced by American film studios. So this will be the main approach for the analysis: how Hollywood has taken *Peter Pan* as its own creation.

2. *PETER PAN*, PARAMOUNT PICTURES, DIR. HERBERT BRENON, 1924

For two decades, film studios tried to negotiate with Barrie to acquire the rights to his most famous creation. Although he always refused, their persistent interest set him thinking. He believed that perhaps the medium of cinema could do for *Peter Pan* things that the stage could not do. Thus, Barrie finally signed a contract with Paramount Pictures and started working on a screenplay. As he declared, this was a great opportunity to re-imagine the story. In this regard, Barrie claimed: «I am entertaining myself successfully by going over the *Peter Pan* film scenario again and putting in new things» (Green, 1954: 169).

His screenplay reveals the great fascination Barrie had for the new medium. He expected a film of *Peter Pan* that would encapsulate all the mysteries and wonders of the original story. As he wrote, the last scene should be the most beautiful: «Now there are only lights from moon and stars, and Peter is seen in silhouette alone, playing his pipes» (Tatar, 2011: 318). The whole screenplay was described as «a mass of fresh visual detail which to anyone [...] must surely have seemed like a gift from Heaven» (Mackail, 1914: 555). However, it was never used. The director decided against using the screenplay by Barrie. With the success of *Peter Pan* as a precedent, he preferred to be on the safe side and adapt the play for the silent screen. Thus, a new screenwriter was hired to carry out the process.

As part of the contract with Paramount Pictures, Barrie was given the last word on the casting. About two hundred candidates – all of them women, as it was a tradition on stage – auditioned for the lead role in the film. When the author saw the screen test by Betty Bronson, he immediately cabled the young actress to let her know that she would be the first Peter Pan in cinema. According to *The Times*, she appeared as an «extraordinarily elfin figure». «Wistful and gay by turns», she made «the lack of words almost an advantage» (Green, 1954: 161). Her work was so praised that she got the lead role in the next film adaptation of a play by Barrie, *A Kiss for Cinderella* (1925).

Despite his concern for adhering to the play, the director took the liberty of paying tribute to his nation. The conversion of the characters into American citizens led to «numerous moments of patriotic fervour and sentimental zeal» (Tatar, 2011: 321). The last scene aboard the Jolly Roger is a good example. The children refuse to join the pirate crew because so they will cease to be loyal to their nation. Inspired by their bravery and conviction, Wendy cries out that their mothers hope that they will die as American gentlemen. After the final battle, Peter Pan celebrates his victory by hoisting the Stars and Stripes flag on the mast. Finally, the eternal boy refuses to stay with Wendy because he does not want to go to school and become the President of the United States. This was absolutely contrary to what Barrie had previously stated in his screenplay, where he had expressed his desire to preserve the Britishness of the original story.¹

Apparently, the film was not the great success that was expected. The audiences who were familiarised with the story lamented that no advantage was taken from the new medium. For most of them, it adhered too much to the play. A critic of *The Times* wrote:

¹ In his screenplay, there is a scene which illustrates this point very well. Here the evening paper is shown in a close-up and Barrie specifies: «It should be a London paper not an American one» (Green, 1954: 172). There are similar examples of Britishness in the screenplay.

«instead of making a film of *Peter Pan*, he [the director] has merely taken the play as it was on the stage and photographed it» (Green, 1954: 161). On his part, Frank Thomas, animator at Walt Disney Studios, remembers:

My mother I guess took me to see it because she thought it was a very good film. What they did was bringing the real theatre on the screen. When came the part in which Tinker Bell was going to die and her light was going out, Betty Bronson began saying: «Come on kids! You've got to clap! If you don't clap she'll die!» That probably played on the theatrical stage pretty well [...]. But on the screen, particularly on the five o'clock showing – that it was dead – none of the kids wanted to clap and attract the attention to themselves (Thomas, 2002).

The version by Paramount Pictures was the only film adaptation of *Peter Pan* which Barrie watched. After seeing it for the first time, he showed his deep disappointment: «[I]t is only repeating what is done on the stage and the only reason for a film should be that it does the things the stage can't do» (Green, 1954: 169). By that time, some elements of the play were considered as classic. So it is possible that the director was afraid of drifting too far away from the original story – although he took some liberties, as previously stated.

3. *PETER PAN*, WALT DISNEY PICTURES, DIR. CLYDE GERONIMI, WILFRED JACKSON AND HAMILTON LUSKE, 1953

Walt Disney started to negotiate the film rights to *Peter Pan* in 1935, as he wanted it to become his second animated film after *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937). Four years later, he came to an arrangement with the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London, owner of the rights to *Peter Pan*. Disney was convinced that animation was the best medium for the story: «one might think that Barrie wrote the play with cartoons in mind. I don't think he was ever happy with the stage version. Live actors are limited, but with cartoons we can give free rein to the imagination» (Tatar, 2011: 324).

For Disney, the process of developing a story could take many years. Most of his animated films went through long periods of development before the animation stage. In this sense, *Peter Pan* was not exception as it was released much later. In an article entitled «Why I Made Peter Pan»² Disney explains: «When I began producing cartoons, *Peter Pan*

² This article by Walt Disney was published in April 1953, just a few weeks after the film premiere, in a magazine called *Brief* which is no longer in print. It is now available in the form of a documentary in the 2007 DVD release of *Peter Pan*.

was high on my list of subjects. Actually it was a long time before we began to work on the story. [...], I was unwilling to start until I could do full justice to the well-loved story» (Disney, 1953). Thus, he waited for the animation techniques to be improved so as to tell the story just as he saw it.

In the early years, Disney made a big effort to adapt *Peter Pan*. He constantly tried to find the right balance between tradition and innovation. Despite the great difficulties of recreating the world created by Barrie, he and his team found the process of adaptation very exciting. In his article, Disney states that the play notes and the stage directions that Barrie wrote for *Peter Pan* were very helpful to them. In this regard, he explains that «his concept of the characters and their reactions to magical events and strange circumstances gave us more inside of what he had in mind than the actual dialogues and scene descriptions» (Disney, 1953).

His concern to be faithful to Barrie's imagination was evident from the earliest stages of the production. When Disney decided to make a film of *Peter Pan*, he expected to show those aspects which could only be suggested on the stage. For instance, Tinker Bell would not be a moving light anymore. Now she was given the chance to show her figure and personality. But there was another interesting innovation. This is the first time that Peter Pan appears with the image of a boy. Thus, the long tradition of women playing the lead role was broken. Now the hero was depicted as a real boy. He was modelled and voiced by Bobby Driscoll, the first Disney star in live-action films.

The most important deviation from the play in the film is the fact of not inviting the audience to applaud so as to bring Tinker Bell back to life. This classic scene remained untouchable in all versions of the story. But after much discussion Disney decided that asking the audience to applaud may not work as well in the film as in the play. Thus, the poison was substituted by a bomb, from which Tinker Bell survives after exploding. But this time it is Peter Pan's love – and not people's faith – which keeps the fairy alive. Despite this, the film adheres closely to the play and it only deviates «through elaboration and embellishment» (Tatar, 2011: 324).

The Disney adaptation is the proof of the complete acceptance of Peter Pan as a contemporary myth. The first minutes of the film are brilliant. Here the narrator points to the cyclical nature of the events: «All of this has happened before and it will happen again». The last minutes of the film are also great. Mr. Darling changes his manners and wistfully says: «I think I've seen that ship before, long long ago». These two lines clearly summarise the philosophy of the story. Indeed, they make reference to the last words of *Peter and Wendy*: «... so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless» (Barrie, 1911: 226). Thus, Barrie as a mythmaker is present throughout the film.

As Barrie evidences on the title of his novel, Wendy is as protagonist as Peter Pan. Disney seemed to have received the message and did full justice to a heroine who has been traditionally regarded as a secondary character. Thus, the film keeps the focus on the growth of Wendy from youth to adulthood – through the abandonment of her childhood dreams. At the end of the story she declares being ready to grow up and «the ship that returned the children home slowly fades away» (Tatar, 2011: 327) as a kind of metaphor for the lost of innocence. This is another example of how Barrie is present throughout the film, even though this sequence does not appear in the original story.

The Disney version of *Peter Pan* was a big success all around the world. But the opinion was quite different among British spectators. For the audience who were brought up on the play and its tradition, it was hard to accept the attempt to bring the story to such a coloured-sound-cartoon medium. When the film was premiered in London, Disney happened to be walking on the street behind two women who on their way saw the marquee of *Peter Pan* on a theatre: «You've seen it yet? / No I haven't but I heard that it's terribly americanized. / Yes, but you know when you see it you don't mind it so much» (Thomas, 2002). Thus, after the first shock, the film was regarded as a satisfactory adaptation of the classic story. According to Disney, that conversation he overheard was the best praise he could have ever received.

Peter Pan was described as «a magnificent piece of entertainment» (Green, 1954: 167). Such was the success of the film that some experts already predicted that Disney cartoons would become the medium of reference for the story of Peter Pan – against the play and the novel. «If it were so, it would be undeniably to [today children's] loss since the magic, the poetry and the touch of the supernatural which constitute the peculiar greatness of Peter Pan could find no place in the film» (Green, 1954: 168). However, contrary to what was stated at the time, the real victim of the successful translation of *Peter Pan* into such new medium was Barrie himself, who was condemned to oblivion.

4. *HOOK*, TRISTAR PICTURES, DIR. STEVEN SPIELBERG, 1991

For many years Steven Spielberg considered making his own live-action film of *Peter Pan*. It would be based on the two previous adaptations of the classic story. In fact, in the earliest stages of the production he worked side by side with Paramount Pictures and Walt Disney Pictures. But in the process of screenwriting, he decided that it would be interesting to introduce a new twist in the story. Under the premise «what if Peter Pan grew up?» Spielberg developed a new vision for the film. Barrie himself had toyed with such an idea

in the latest years of his life. But he seemed to realise that, in case of writing *The Old Age of Peter Pan*, he would probably suffer the same fate as Conan Doyle when decided to kill his creature.³ Thus, Peter Pan remained a boy forever. But Spielberg failed to see the author's warning.

Michael Jackson was the first choice to play the lead role. However, despite being his lifetime wish,⁴ the artist refused to get involved due to a disagreement on the approach to the story. The vision for the film did not match his own. This is how Robin Williams went on to play Peter Pan. *Hook* tells the story of «When Peter Grew Up» (Tatar: 2011, 332) – in contrast with the title of the last chapter of *Peter and Wendy*.⁵ Now he is an adult with no memory of his childhood. When he grew up he forgot his true identity. So he became an ordinary man. Taking this important twist into consideration, this film is considered the one which is furthest removed from the original conception.

Raised in the land of opportunity, Peter Pan here embodies the American dream. He is a successful lawyer with a family of his own. However, his life is not as happy as it seems. The quest for professional success has led him to abandon his family. Thus, the film explores the relationship between parents and children. «I have always felt like Peter Pan» (Tatar, 2011: 331), Spielberg once declared. But in what sense? In an interview the director explains his personal connection with the adult version of Peter Pan:

I think a lot of people today are losing their imagination because they are work-driven. They are so self-involved with work and success and arriving at the next plateau that children and family almost become incidental. I have even experienced it myself when I have been on a very tough shoot and I've not seen my kids except on weekends. They ask for my time and I can't give it to them because I'm working (Bahiana, 1992: 154).

When Peter Pan recovers his imagination, he also recovers his children. The last scene of the film mimics the ending of *Peter Pan* by Disney as it also shows the family looking out the window. Now ties are strengthened and the hero proclaims: «To live will be an

³ Arthur Conan Doyle, sick of Sherlock Holmes due to the time he spent writing his adventures, decided to kill the character in *The Final Problem* (1893). However, pressure from readers forced Conan Doyle to bring the famous detective back to life in *The Adventure of the Empty House* (1903).

⁴ During all his life, Michael Jackson identified himself with the eternal boy. Indeed, he named his residence *Neverland Ranch*, after the fantasy island of the story. This comes to prove the great significance of Peter Pan in Western culture, where he represents a symbol for youthful and innocence.

⁵ «When Wendy Grew Up» is closely based on a scene only once performed in Barrie's lifetime. It is entitled «An Afterthought» and it tells the tragic encounter between Peter Pan and the adult Wendy. It also deals with the cyclical nature of the events, as Jane substitutes her mother in the story.

awfully big adventure» – in clear contrast with his cry on the Marooners' Rock: «To die will be an awfully big adventure» (Barrie, 1911: 152). The comparison between these two mottos raises the major difference between both versions of the character: their attitude towards life and death. For the adult Peter Pan, in his quality of finite being, there is not a biggest adventure than enjoying life with his family. However, for the eternal boy, there is not a biggest adventure than dying – as it is something unattainable for him.

A significant feature of the film is the ability of Tinker Bell to speak. Until then, her voice was never heard. Although in the original story she utters a few words – through the sound of bells – which only Peter Pan can understand. Spielberg may have thought that it would have been illogical to hire Julia Roberts and not let her to speak – though it could have been an interesting challenge for the actress. However, unlike the Disney version, this fairy stands out for her lack of passion and conviction. Accordingly, the actress received negative reviews for her performance.

Hook was a great success but most film critics gave the film negative reviews. Spielberg did not adhere at all to the story by Barrie, except for some famous lines which did not fit very well in the dialogues. He made a big effort to adapt the story for a modern audience, but the result was clearly disappointing. Perhaps, the only interesting feature of the film is the creation of a mysterious atmosphere for the London scenes. During these minutes the spirit of Barrie seems to be wandering all around. But, on the whole, *Hook* is considered a big failure.

5. *PETER PAN*, UNIVERSAL PICTURES, DIR. P. J. HOGAN, 2003

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the play – premiered in London in 1904 – Universal Pictures decided to pay tribute to Peter Pan through a film. With such celebration as a premise, the screenplay was expected to be faithful to the story. Thus, it did not only adhere closely to the play and the novel but also borrowed much of the language from both. In this regard, the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London said: «[I]t is in keeping with the original work whilst communicating to an audience with modern sensibilities» (Tatar, 2011: 332).

This new version was intended to be the first (sound) live-action film of *Peter Pan*. Such an ambitious project was made possible thanks to visual effects. Technical advances were very different from those of a century ago. So it was easier to get closer to the original conception of the story. Laura Duguid, descendant of the family who inspired Peter Pan, points: «The visual effects are going to be stunning and that is one of the things that he

[Barrie] would have appreciated. He would have thought that was wonderful. I mean, all the flying, all the fighting» (Hogan, 2004).

In reference to the statue erected in Kensington Gardens in 1912, Barrie once said: «[I]t doesn't show the devil in *Peter Pan*» (Birkin, 2005: 202). The same occurs with the choice of Jeremy Sumpters to play the lead role in the film. With his angelic face, he captivated the audience but his performance did no justice to the character. It seems as if people responsible for casting were more interested in finding a new Hollywood teen star than in finding the right actor. Accordingly, *Peter Pan* is depicted as a teenager who constantly flirts with Wendy. He is on the edge of adulthood and begins experiencing unfamiliar desires. Despite this romantic turn, the film generally received positive reviews by film critics.

6. CONCLUSION

Over a century after his birth, audiences in UK still wait for a film of *Peter Pan* starred by a British actor. However, it is not surprising that until now the hero has been played by an American one, even in the animated film. Within a cast entirely made up of British actors, the person in charge of playing Peter Pan has always made the difference. It is certain that the boy was raised among the fairies and, consequently, had no contact with civilization. But it does not mean that he needed to acquire an American accent. From the analysis of the four major film adaptations of *Peter Pan*, it seems clear that most directors did not care too much about Barrie and his original conception of the story. Nonetheless, the animated film can be considered the closest version to the text. The Disney film has its own identity but it never fails to be faithful to Barrie. Indeed, «he [the author] would infinitely have preferred the Walt Disney cartoon [...] – and fully have appreciated both the difficulties and the triumphs of its attempt to capture the Never, Never Land»⁶ (Green, 1954: 168).

⁶ It should be noted that Green made this statement many years before *Hook* (1991) and *Peter Pan* (2003) were premiered. So it is impossible to know whether he may have stated the same about these two films.

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