

Representing the Villain and the Hero in Film Adaptations of *Oliver Twist*

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1. Dickens and film: notes on a story of enduring popularity

It is a well-known fact that Charles Dickens has always been a widely adapted novelist. One of the main reasons for this is to be found, perhaps, in the large popularity of the Victorian novelist in America. As is stated by Geric DeBona, in America (which he visited twice), Dickens “was an instant celebrity” (DeBona, 2000: 106). Another emphasis has been placed on the influence of Dickens in the shaping of film art through the connection made by Sergei Eisenstein between Dickens’s narrative and the configuration of filmic narrative. In “Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today”, Eisenstein quotes D. W. Griffith’s reference to the importance of the Victorian novelist in the configuration of the narrative structure of his films; Eisenstein credits Griffith with the saying that “he had arrived at montage through the method of parallel action, and he was led to the idea of parallel action by – Dickens!” (Eisenstein, 1999: 139).

In the same essay, Eisenstein credits Charles Dickens’s influence on Griffith for more than the use of montage, for he also refers to the bourgeois and reformist tendencies of Charles Dickens’s novels, where the happy ending comfortingly reassures the reader that the goodness of the bourgeois just hero will restore the order which had been disrupted by the marginal villain. In Eisenstein’s translated words:

What were the novels of Dickens for his contemporaries, for his readers? There is one answer: they bore the same relation to them that the film bears to the same strata in our time. They compelled the reader to live with the same passions. They appealed to the same good and sentimental elements as does the film (at least on the surface); they alike shudder from vice, they alike mill the extraordinary, the unusual, the fantastic, from boring, prosaic and everyday existence. And they clothe this common and prosaic existence in their special vision (Eisenstein, 1999: 140).

If it is true that the “happy ending” of Dickens’s realist novels may appeal to “good and sentimental elements”, it is not so certain that it was or is on account of these sentiments that *Oliver Twist* has had such enduring appeal since the time when it was first published, having survived in the most various guises up until the twentieth first century. One might ask, as does F. S. Schwarzbach, in an essay dealing with the subject of “the Newgate” novel, whether such appeal might not come instead from the “time-honored observations that depicting goodness is boring but wickedness is quite interesting, and that innocence virtually demands that a

corrupter rise up to sully it" (Schwarzbach, 2006: 228). That the character of Oliver Twist may exist to deny the second part of the previous assertion, for he is the innocence that virtually resists all the corrupters' rise to sully it, may not be enough to deny that it is the portrayal of wickedness, namely in the characters of Fagin and Sikes, that may account for the endurance of the story of the Dickensian young orphan through the years. Yet, it may be that the ever-lasting story of the orphan Oliver Twist rests precisely on the fact that the character functions of hero and villain are well defined and, at the same time, so open to ever new interpretations and rewritings, as I will try to demonstrate here.

In an introduction to one of the many Penguin editions of the novel, Angus Wilson focuses on the groups of characters that are present in the story and sorts them out into three groups, constituted by: the people connected to Oliver Twist's birth and education in the Workhouse, the widow Corney's farm and the Sowerburys (the undertaker where Oliver starts to work after he leaves the workhouse), the upper-middle class ladies and gentlemen that are connected to Oliver's origins and are the good people that take care of him (and these are Mr Brownlow, Mrs. Maylie and Rose Maylie), and, thirdly, the group of rogues, led by Fagin, Oliver joins when he comes to London; connected to this third group, the figures of Bill Sikes and Nancy are central to the development of the narrative. Linking all these groups we have the figures of Oliver Twist and Monks, his half-brother. Yet, the more film adaptations of the novel we see, the more we will come to the conclusion that the most pervasive characters are the villains and not the other groups. Thus, we would be inclined to agree with Angus Wilson when he states, in relation to the novel:

Fagin, Sikes, and the gang are brought sternly and horribly to justice, yet there are few readers who would deny that they and not the genteel ghosts who represent respectable society in *Oliver Twist* are the true kings of the novel; and that in some curious way Fagin's court for all its squalor and meanness has a sort of ghastly gaiety and life that makes Mr Brownlow's hot punch and Rose Maylie's country flower picking expeditions seem like the feeble stirrings of the moribund (Wilson, 1976: 19).

It is on account of the supposed immorality of these characters and of their potential to produce a bad influence on readers that Charles Dickens felt the need to respond to those who attacked his novel as leading to immorality, in a Preface to a later edition, explaining that

I saw no reason, when I wrote this book, why the very dregs of life, so long as their speech did not offend the ear, should not serve the purpose of a moral, at least as well as its froth and cream (Dickens, 1976: 33)

The author further argued for the morality of his novel, by distancing it from the Newgate novel, which he views as truly immoral, in the sense that it presents the lives of the

criminals in an alluring and fascinating mode, thus disguising their vileness. But, in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens argues, nothing of the kind happens, for the villains are truly and rightly portrayed as despicable subjects:

What manner of life is that which is described in these pages, as the everyday existence of a Thief? What charms has it for the young and ill-disposed, what allurements for the most jolter-headed of juveniles? (...) The cold wet shelterless midnight streets of London; the foul and frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease; the shabby rags that scarcely hold together; where are the attractions of these things? They have no lesson, and do they not whisper something beyond the little-regarded warning of an abstract moral precept? (Dickens, 1976: 34-5)

Oliver Twist is, by and large, the rather melodramatic story of an orphan that has been mistreated at the hands of a state system that makes him endure starvation and child labour; that traffics his body, by selling him to anyone who would give him an apprenticeship in any profession; who, having also been mistreated by the undertaker who takes him at his care, flees to the city of London to find his fortune and, having arrived there, falls in the hands of a villainous old man, who devotes himself to teaching young children how to steal for him; finally, this is the story of a very innocent boy who finds that his innocence and tender demeanour, will be recompensed in the end, and, in the process, finds out about his lost family, re-enacting the bonds that had been lost at his birth, and inherits a nice sum of money.

On the whole, the melodrama is as appealing today as it has ever been. Be it in the nineteenth or in the twentieth-first century, this story has all the ingredients of good entertainment, namely, it has qualities of melodrama and comedy that may explain its popular appeal. As Q. D. Leavis noticed, as far as 1932, in *Fiction and the Reading Public*: "Dickens... discovered... the formula 'laughter and tears' that has been the foundation of practically every popular success ever since (Hollywood's as well as the best seller's)" (quoted in Dennett, 2000: 56). Although the aim of Q. D. Leavis's remark is of criticism rather than of praise, for she, then, goes on to deride such style as being "[f]ar from requiring an intellectual stimulus" (*id.: ibid.*), this formula may well account for the immense popularity of Dickens, namely of *Oliver Twist*. This formula would, subsequently, be explored by the innumerable adaptations of the novel, which would emphasise, as the case might be, either the melodrama or the comedy at the centre of the narrative.

2. Adapting *Oliver Twist*: some crucial intertexts

Oliver Twist was an immediate success as soon as it started serialization, at first, in monthly instalments in *Bentley's Miscellany*. The novel was serialized, at uneven intervals, from February 1837 to April 1839. Evidence of *Oliver Twist's* success lies, for example, in the fact that

the story was immediately transposed to the Theatre with several theatrical productions of it appearing at the time¹. This was a common practice at the time and Dickens's stories seem to have appealed greatly to the appetite of these melodramatic theatrical producers. The same can be said in relation to film, with the first film adaptation of *Oliver Twist* appearing as soon as 1909, by Vitagraph². The list of film adaptations of *Oliver Twist*, including TV series, animated films and films for the television, is quite long; the IMD, for example, lists about 30 titles, ranging from 1906 to 2007. Here, we will only be referring to some of these adaptations.³

But, before we go on to analyse the films themselves, there is still another element of Dickensian influence on modern cinema that Eisenstein mentions in his previously quoted essay, which I would also like to address here, and that is the plasticity of Charles Dickens's writing. According to Eisenstein:

Perhaps the secret lies in Dickens's (as well as cinema's) creation of an extraordinary plasticity. The observation in the novels is extraordinary – as is their optical quality. The characters of Dickens are rounded with means as plastic and slightly exaggerated as are the screen heroes of today. The screen's heroes are engraved on the senses of the spectators with clearly visible traits, its villains are remembered by certain facial expressions, and all are saturated in the peculiar, slightly unnatural radiant gleam thrown over them by the screen (Eisenstein, 1999: 142)⁴.

As insightful as Eisenstein's emphasis on Dickens's plasticity may be, it nevertheless disregards another more plastic art associated to the Victorian novel, which is the illustration. As Joss Marshen and Kamilla Elliott have pointedly argued in "Novels, Films, and the Word/Image Wars", the same way film makers and film studies scholars tend to ignore the centrality of the word in the film, literary scholars often disregard the impact of illustration on the high realist novel. Apparently, Joss Marsh and Kamilla Elliott tell us, book illustration historians believe that the cinema displaced Victorian illustrated fiction, for they would, often, be the filmed reproduction of a much loved illustration. Thus, the influences that we may find on all the filmic adaptations of the Victorian novel must necessarily take into account other visual and verbal representations of the novel, be it the theatrical adaptations, be it the illustrations.

Oliver Twist is a case in point, in this regard, since it was illustrated by the famous caricaturist George Cruikshank. In fact, Cruikshank was responsible for the polemical assertion that Dickens owed the idea of *Oliver Twist* to his illustrations, an assertion that was promptly derided as completely preposterous, by defenders of Charles Dickens⁵. The Dickens-Cruikshank

¹ In relation to this see Schwarzbach (2006: 233) and Wilson (1976: 15).

² According to the Internet Movie Database, there is a film from 1906, with the title *A Modern Oliver Twist*, also produced by the Vitagraph Company (cf. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0000564/>).

³ For a list of the film adaptations which will be referred to in this essay see the filmography at the end.

⁴ It might be worth noting that Eisenstein's stress on Dickensian influence on the creation of film is highly overstated for several reasons, as has been stated by other critics, but this is not the place to debate the issue and, for the sake of my argument here, I felt it useful to remind the Soviet director's words, although they might apply to other Victorian novelists with the same relevance.

⁵ Philip V. Allingham explains: "After Dickens's death in 1870, Cruikshank made the preposterous assertion that it

controversy, as it came to be known, has already been debated abundantly by each part of the opposing poles. The controversy in itself is quite insignificant and on the whole a spurious question, at least for the sake of this paper's argument. I would tend to align with defenders of the Cruikshank version of the story, simply for the fact that his assertion does not in any way diminish Dickens's style and imaginative writing. It is quite convincing that Cruikshank, as the illustrator of *Oliver Twist* and as an elderly artist (in relation to the very young Dickens, at the time) may have made suggestions to the writer, as Richard Vogler states in his defence of George Cruikshank (cf. Vogler, 1992: 62).⁶

Yet, even if Cruikshank had not had any influence upon the making of the characters in the novel, the same may not hold true for the filmed versions of the story. George Cruikshank was a remarkable caricaturist, one of the most renowned of his time, and the plates he made as illustrations for *Oliver Twist* did survive, both in later editions of the novel and in their subsequent reproductions on film. Of all the many filmed versions that we can see of *Oliver Twist*, none retains strictly the same elements of the narrative; some of the sub-plots and characters disappear, some parts of the plot are altered. Yet, there are some scenes and characters (apart from Oliver himself) that are always present in the different versions. And it may be no small mark that left by Cruikshank that most of the scenes that are recurrent in the different versions are the ones that he illustrated. Scenes like "Oliver asking for more", "Oliver plucks up a Spirit", "Oliver introduced to the Respectable Old Gentleman", "Oliver amazed at the Dodger's way of 'going to work'" (and I am here using Cruikshank's captions that appear under the illustrations) are good examples of the surviving art of Cruikshank, as much as that of Dickens.

The fact that Cruikshank depicted mainly the characters that are more prone to caricature, namely those connected to the Poor House system and the London underworld, is indicative of his extended knowledge of this world, and may account for the resonant vitality of characters like the widow Corney and Mr. Bumble, the Beadle, and, of course, Fagin and the gang of boys, as well as Bill Sikes and Nancy. Moreover, it may be unquestionable that the fairly similarity of costume that we may find in each of the adaptations may also lead us to this first visual source of the novel, which no film maker could reasonably ignore. Evidently, the more adaptations that are made of the same story the more visual sources may be taken into account. Each new production of *Oliver Twist* does not ignore the previous ones and this may also account for some repetition to be found in the different versions.

It is more or less obvious that the visuals of the several adaptations of *Oliver Twist* are to be found, not only in the text, but also in other visual intertexts, namely, illustrations of the London streets or other pictures of the nineteenth century. In the 1909 adaptation, bearing the imprint of its time, when cinema was still very close to theatrical *mise en scène*, we can see very clearly the most important scenes of the novel as if they were "tableaux-vivants", in scenes that are clearly evocative of the illustrations.

was he who had originated *Oliver Twist*, a claim which Dickens's biographer and confidant, John Forster, refuted by referring the Dickens's letters, although the plates for that novel certainly reflect Cruikshank's extensive knowledge of the London underworld." (Allingham, 2000)

⁶ Where he mentions that "[t]his kind of collaborative effort was quite customary at the time" (Vogler, 1992: 62).

3. From villain to hero and the other way around: different versions of *Oliver Twist*

Undoubtedly, the various film adaptations emphasize different aspects of the novel. The downsizing of the narrative is a direct consequence, and an almost inevitable one, of the need to compress the length of a fifty-two chapter realist novel to the usual ninety-minute or so film format. Yet, what each version leaves out is also indicative of the emphasis the several authors of the films wanted to lay on the story, being also indicative of the social and historical context of each production and the audience the film is aimed at.

For example, the Disney adaptation for the TV, produced in 1997, is clearly aimed at a very young audience of our time. This is the story of an orphan, who is not as innocent as his first predecessors (he is made well aware that he has a family, because, from the start he has knowledge that his mother left him a trinket, which contains the evidence of his ancestry). What this version of *Oliver Twist* does to the story is, in a way, to smooth the Manichean disparities between Oliver and the other criminals, by implying that Oliver is as naughty a boy as any other (namely those that belong to the gang); by portraying Fagin in a much lighter tone, stressing his amiability more than his villainy.

This is a radical example of the sort of transformation a classic novel can undergo for the sake of its adaptation to the times, as well as to a new audience. As Linda Hutcheon states, in her *Theory of Adaptation*:

Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments by virtue of mutation – in their “offspring” or their adaptations. And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish.” (Hutcheon, 2006: 32).

It is certainly true that Dickens’s story has proven to be a very resistant species, for it has flourished in so many different guises throughout the years.

I would like to end by comparing two specific adaptations, the David Lean film of 1948 and the more recent version by Roman Polanski (2005). David Lean’s *Oliver Twist* (1948) is a Cineguild production. Following the production (also by Cineguild and David Lean) of *Great Expectations* (1946), which had been released the preceding year and had met with great acclaim, *Oliver Twist* was also highly successful. Of the two versions which I am here focusing on, this is, definitively, the one that is closest to a certain popular and cheaply melodramatic tone of Dickens’s text. This happens, on the one hand, because the screenplay (written by David Lean and Stanley Hayes) tries to be more faithful to the Dickensian narrative, which means that it does not cut out any main sequences of the plot, with the exception of the episodes that have to do with the Maylies. Nevertheless, the function they serve in the Dickensian narrative, that of helpers and supporters of Oliver (and, in the end, in a clear stroke of fate of providing Oliver with the joy of a real family link), is entirely transported to the character of Mr. Brownlow. The fact is that, by preserving the plot reasonably unchanged, this film manages to maintain the moralising tone of Dickens’s text, including a rather bourgeois effect on a plot that tends to

justify Oliver's goodness and nice manners through his upper-class origins.

On the other hand, David Lean's *mise en scène* expressly emphasises the gothic undertones of Dickens's text, marking the film with an overwhelming dramatic intensity. This is achieved by several means, namely: the musical soundtrack; the high contrast and low key lightning associated to the more dramatic scenes in opposition to the high key lightning of the bourgeois environments of the film; the expressive positioning of the camera at low or high angles to reinforce Oliver's sense of loss, entrapment or terror, at certain points of the narrative. This gothic atmosphere is highlighted by the character of Fagin (played by Alec Guinness), who is portrayed as a truly repulsive and villainous old man, as Dickens describes him in the novel – "(...) a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair" (Dickens, 1976: 105). In the end, contrarily to what happens, for example, in the Carol Reed's musical adaptation from 1968, where Fagin is left unpunished and is, in a sense, rendered more pardonable a character, we see Fagin being led by the police, who are heartily applauded by the crowd that had gathered around the place. Fagin's character in this film was considered so repulsive that the film had to be expurgated of some of the scenes featuring Alec Guinness for presentation to the American public. Coming as it did just after the II World War, such a repulsive portrayal of a Jew was considered offensive. This may account, on the other hand, for the amiability the character displays in the subsequent film adaptations, namely, in the above mentioned film *Oliver!* (1968), directed by Carol Reed – where, for the sake of the lighter tone of the musical, the figure of the Jew is far less despicable and entirely entertaining.⁷

Roman Polanski's film, with screenplay by Ronald Harwood, is, in opposition, much less melodramatic, something that is achieved, partly, by totally cutting out some crucial sequences of the plot. For example, this version completely dismisses the sub-plot of Oliver's origins and the film begins without any reference to Oliver's mother (in this, Polanski's film follows on the footsteps of Carol Reed's version, although this is a very different film, altogether). When the film opens, Oliver is already nine years old and is being taken back to the Workhouse by the Beadle (apparently coming from Mrs. Corney's farmhouse). So, although the character of Mr. Brownlow is present in the story, he is simply a kind gentleman that helps Oliver out in his struggle for survival. The emphasis of this version is entirely put on Oliver's path from workhouse orphan to upper-class gentleman. And this is a theme that, as has already been stated elsewhere, completely befits the director Roman Polanski, who had to struggle for survival on his own, in Nazi Germany, especially after his parents were taken to a concentration camp. Thus, in this version, Oliver, as an individual, is given much more prominence than in the film version of 1948. For example, the scene of Oliver's flight to London is given much more time than in David Lean's film, showing the hardships of the journey, something that Polanski would know about.

On the other hand, this film is imbued with a certain heritage glamour that is not present in David Lean's film. In Polanski's film, the London scenes, which were shot in the Czech Republic, boast a luxurious setting, where costumes and props are reconstructed to meet historical accuracy in a way that was not possible before. In that sense, and although this is a

⁷ This film adaptation is not wholly based on the novel, but it is an adaptation of the musical *Oliver!*, with music, lyrics and book by Lionel Bart; this musical first appeared in 1960, in London's West End.

story that does not dwell on the upper strata of society, we can view this film against the backdrop of the genre of “heritage”, in the sense that it shows what Andrew Higson has described as “[t]he pictorialist Museum aesthetic”, (Higson, 2003: 39).

The tone of this film is, thus, completely different from the dramatic intensity of the David Lean adaptation. In this case, there is an emphasis on the heroic qualities of Oliver, who is able to go through all the ordeals unabated, always trying to achieve a better life for himself. As to the portrayal of the villains, we can see some differences in tone in relation to Fagin. Here, this character, interpreted by Ben Kingsley, is as repellent and cunning a creature as the one played by Alec Guinness, although a little bit more benevolent towards Oliver. Polanski’s version keeps Oliver’s visit to Fagin in the prison, a scene that is present in the novel (but not in the 1948 adaptation), where he receives Fagin’s tender embrace before his death. In this scene, Oliver shows a little bit more affection for the old Jew than in the novel, though. In the novel, Oliver’s visit to Fagin in the prison has the purpose of asking him where the papers that Monks had left to Fagin were. In Polanski’s film, however, it is Oliver who asks to see Fagin in jail for no other reason than out of kindness towards the old man. There seems to be a much more benevolent treatment of Fagin, who, in this version, and compared to all the atrocities that Oliver goes through while he is at the Workhouse, is far from being the worst villain in the story.

A last note, in a paper dedicated to the portrayal of villains and heroes in *Oliver Twist*, to the figure of Sikes. Although he is in the group of those that are present in all adaptations of the novel, he is very constant in all of them, being always represented as a hardened criminal and murderer, that is, a villain without redemption. It is incontrovertible that while the figures of Oliver and, especially, of Fagin are quite open to new interpretations, not much thought has been devoted so far to the figure of Sikes, who, although a central figure in most of the adaptations, retains his Manichean feature as the representative of evil. Through the figure of Sikes, of all the different but rather tough Sikes(es), the story maintains its original balance between good and evil and, ultimately, its morality.

In conclusion, the countless stories of *Oliver Twist* seem to retain an essential moral tone, which helps us associate it to the genre of the children’s story or, even, of the fairy tale. When asked about why *Oliver Twist*, Polanski said that he wanted to make a film for his children and he thought of *Oliver Twist* as a story he would like to tell them. And, as in all fairy tales, we can find here a structure that is irretrievably timeless, which is combined with a set of elements that kindly adapt to the geo-political and individual choices of each narrative. The figure of Fagin is particularly open to re-interpretation and rewriting, which may be in part due to the ambiguity of Dickens’s narrative towards this character, but is probably best accounted for by a need to meet ideological fluctuations that are deeply rooted in the historical context of each adaptation.

Filmography:

- Oliver Twist* (1909), USA, directed by J. Stuart Blackton, Vitagraph Company of America.
- Oliver Twist* (1948), U.K., directed and adapted by David Lean (with screenplay assistance by Stanley Haynes); Rank/Cineguild.
- Oliver!* (1968), U.K., directed by Carol Reed, adapted by Vernon Harris from Lionel Bart's stage version; Romulus/ Columbia
- Oliver Twist* (1997), USA, directed by Tony Bill, adapted by Monte Merrick, Laurence Marks Productions and Walt Disney Television (for TV).
- Oliver Twist* (2005), France, U.K. and Czech Republic, directed by Roman Polanski with screenplay by Ronald Harwood; independent co-production by R.P Films, Ruteam II Ltd. and Etic Films S.R.O.

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