

En-visioning Dickens: The Why and How of Early Silent and Sound Films

Michael PRONKO

Introduction

When early filmmakers began to search for stories, they turned first to the masters of the nineteenth century novel. Among those, Charles Dickens has become the single most adapted novelist during the last century of film adaptations. At first, short silent films took only the most famous scenes from his works, but gradually by the 1930s sound era, filmmakers began to search for ways to create more complete and thorough adaptations of his works, followed by the 1940s where directors such as David Lean adapted with ingenuity and individuality. The intensity of filmmakers' devotion to working out ways of adapting his novels reveals a great deal about the overlap between film and novel narrative. The intensity also reveals, as a sort of narrative X-ray, a great deal about the original novels, as well as in a broader way, the many reasons for even attempting an adaptation. An examination of the ever-changing ways of adapting Dickens, from the 1920s to the 30s through the 40s, reveals how the reasons for methods of adapting fluctuated and, in a sense, evolved. Adaptation has continued to be a basic principle of film production, with adaptations making up some two-thirds of all films, many of which are of Victorian novels.

The 1920s silent adaptations are notable for their reliance on Victorian theatrical conventions. The early silent films thus captured what the many stage adaptations of Dickens would have been like. The silent films preserve the past, but also exhibit their own approach adaptation. Their approaches shifted significantly with the advancing technology and technique of the 1930s. With the introduction of sound, new cameras, non-consecutive shooting of scripts and other innovations, a different conception of adaption developed. The motivations for adapting Dickens also continued to deeply influence the process of filmmaking and the 1930s showed that Dickens's stories were

relevant to a new contingent of filmgoers. By the mid-1930s, the relation of film adaptation to the original novel also evolved with new ways of condensing the novel events, scenes and dialogue with ever-greater facility within the then-dominant studio system. To do all this, the 1930s turned back to the novels for inspiration, rather than relying on the well-honed theatrical approaches of the 1920s. While modern standards of critical judgment may not rate those studio-made films as highly as the silent masterpieces or as the director-as-auteur films of the 1940s, the 1930s films hold special attraction for their immense popularity, a reception that echoed that of Dickens's novels themselves.

By the 1940s, film adaptations had shifted their approach, motivations and techniques once again, this time towards greater facility with directing and increased expressivity. The greater freedom that directors, in particular David Lean, exercised allowed them to create adaptations with their own distinct vision. The 1920s adapted with a post-Victorian dramatic view, the 1930s as Hollywood studio system entertainment, but Lean conceived of adaptation as expressing a unique directorial interpretation. The degree of and feeling for interpretation became a basic part of how Lean's films were directed and received. Ironically, perhaps, this interpretive style of adaptation became slightly submerged with the later BBC serialized adaptations. The sense of dramatic presentation of the 1920s and the popularizing condensed narrative of the 1930s thus turned into a more nuanced and critical set of commentaries and interpretations. The director's views became central to how the late 1940s films were conceived and created. These new changes in filming were further shaped by the social, economic and psychological factors emerging in the post-war zeitgeist. Lean's adaptations no longer sought to dramatize the central conflicts, as in the 1920s, or present a mimetic reproduction of the key novel events, as in the 1930s, but to create films that utilized the novel as the basis for critical reflection and political statement.

These hundreds of film adaptations of Dickens works over the last century can be seen as a series of ever-evolving interpretations of his novels. At the same time, the films offer reflections of the conception of filmmaking at different historical junctures as well as a sense of the notion of the narrative altogether. Adaptations reveal the conceptions of larger themes, dramatic conflicts and narrative complexities that overlap between two ostensibly different narrative forms—film and novel. Considering the adaptations together through a contrasting approach can reveal tremendous insights into how Dickens was understood at different times, how he was valued and what ongoing relevance his stories, characters, scenes and images continued to have. The debt that

film owes to the nineteenth century novel is important to note here. Despite the often-cited divergence of word and image, both novels and films work with a combination of words and images. The interplay between these two narrative forms can be understood better by examining adaptations of important novels. Examining films from different cinematic eras will also show that at one extreme, film narrative may be considered parasitical upon novel narrative, yet at the other extreme, film narrative may be considered an entirely autonomous creation. A more productive view, however, will find a balanced middle between these extremes, where the interaction between film and novel can be seen to be an intriguingly creative and deeply collaborative exchange.

Oliver Twist is one of Dickens's most widely read works and one of the most often adapted. *Oliver Twist* is also an important novel because, as J. Hillis Miller argues, the novel "presents in a pure and vivid form most of the characteristic scenes, figures and motifs of Dickens's later novels" (Miller 31). Miller emphasizes the importance of the novel by arguing that Dickens's career as a novelist is, "an exploration or a gradual bringing to the surface of the implications and inner complexities of *Oliver Twist*" (Miller 31). Whether one agrees that *Oliver Twist* stands as a kind of ur-text or that all of Dickens's novels form an "organic whole, a single great work" as Miller further elaborates, the potential is immense for film to re-view, in all the metaphoric senses of that word, Dickens's works and help excavate new views.

It is no surprise, then, that *Oliver Twist* has been adapted so often. Dickens considered a play of *Oliver Twist* even before the novel was entirely finished (Schlicke 438). As Joss Marsh points out, "Only *Dracula* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* beat out *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol* (of which there are 30-plus versions each) for the status of most-filmed single fiction in history" (Marsh 204). This paper will examine the why and how of three film adaptations of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (hereafter the novel will be referred to by its entire name) by examining three different film versions: the first directed by Frank Lloyd in 1922 (hereafter referred to as "Lloyd's *OT*"); the second directed by William J. Cohen in 1933 (hereafter referred to as "Cohen's *OT*"); and the third, directed by David Lean in 1948 (hereafter referred to as "Lean's *OT*"). These three films show how the motivations and purposes for adapting a novel, the technology and techniques for making a film, and the meaningful critique the films made about issues have evolved over the decades. Looking at these three films together as a series of sorts can also tease out the complex and meaningful ways in which Dickens continues to be, to borrow Paul Davis' term, a vibrant "culture-text" (Davis 3).

Three Visions One Scene

By the time film began to regularly adapt Dickens, the most famous of his scenes had already become known to a general public as distinct, separate scenes. Not only had characters such as Scrooge taken on a life of their own, as Paul Davis has demonstrated, but specific scenes and situations had as well. Dickens helped this process along with his public readings, where he selected his own favorite scenes to be read in his own voice. For Dickens himself, the scene of Nancy's death was his own favorite public reading, a scene so demanding it is often blamed for the fatigue that hastened his death (Ackroyd 1030). The scene of Oliver asking for more was certainly one of the most famous scenes from the entire of Dickens's works and it is as apt a focus for comparison across cinematic periods as any.

What the scene of Oliver asking for more reveals is the central importance of scenes as narrative units that adapt from novel to film. The importance of adapting within a paradigm of scenes, though, shifts from the 20s through the 40s, as does the way those scenes are used to construct meaning in the story. This particular scene reveals a great deal about the importance of the scene to Dickens's works and how they served as a nodal point of adaptation to film, just as they had served in theatrical adaptations and Dickens's own public readings. Closely connected to the issue of scenes as a point of transfer is the tension between the filmic and the cinematic. The filmic refers here to the visual aspects of a work, whether novel or film, and cinematic refers to the interconnection of those filmic elements into a complete narrative.

One of the key differences between film and novel narratives, then, would seem to be the construction and meaning of scenes. However, even attempting to accurately define "scene" can quickly get entangled in structuralist minutiae, but here "scene" can be taken to mean a complete and basic unit of a narrative that creates meaning within the story's larger framework. Typically, "scene" involves a continuous set of interconnected actions in a single time and place. However, when thinking of a novel, a play or a film, the very concept of scene can become quickly confusing, as it is materially and conceptually different in each type of story. However, the scene is one of the most complex and masterful units that Dickens employed, one that was both highly visual and extremely dramatic. Because of the scenic construction of Dickens's narratives, the novels were adaptable to many different forms.

Lloyd's *OT* in 1922 constructed its scenes almost entirely on dramatic principles, in keeping with the concept of silent film as essentially a form of theater with the camera

in one place focusing on the action of characters moving in front of the camera. Silent cinema drew on the conventions of the theater, as Kristin Thompson notes,

[T]he primitive cinema largely assumed that the spectator was equivalent to an audience member in a theater. *Mise-en-scene* often imitated theatrical settings, and actors behaved as if they were on an actual stage. The framing and staging of scenes in constructed sets placed the spectator at a distance from the space of the action, looking into it. Devices like crosscutting, montage sequences and dissolves for eliding or compressing time were not in general use. (Thomson 138)

With the absence of more complex narrative devices that were developed in the later Hollywood classical period, silent films had to rely on the impact of specific scenes. This seems to suggest that silent film was very nearly an illustration of the novel, though a moving illustration.

To conceive of silent film as “simply” illustration seems to be a rather condescending view, however, illustrations are richly complex evocations of mood, place, character, action and conflict that Dickens considered very important, as did Victorian novelists in general. Indeed, it was with *Oliver Twist* that illustrations become an important consideration for Dickens and his publishers. Dickens told his publisher that his ideas for illustrating *Oliver* “will bring Cruickshank out” (qtd. in Schlicke 439).

The resulting illustration was the incomparable “*Oliver Asking for More*” (18 January 1837). The plates of Sikes on the rooftop (*‘The Last Chance’*) and of *‘Fagin in the Condemned Cell’* are among the most admired of all Cruickshank’s works. (qtd. in Schlicke 439)

Dickens’s consideration of the scenes at the time of their imagining, publishing, and dramatizing as well as later performing in public readings reveal how very important the scenic structure was. In short, those particular scenes already had an iconic status of their own that silent film sought to employ. It is perhaps too easy to try to compare the staging of the film scenes with Cruickshank’s originals, since the films drew simultaneously on theatre for ways of staging these famous scenes. Lloyd’s *OT* could be said to be a film told as a series of illustrated scenes, each with its own dramatic impact.

If Lloyd’s *OT* was based on scenic illustrations and dramatic principles, then Cohen’s *OT* sought to integrate the scenes with all the smoothness of classical Hollywood style. Four scenes alone—Nancy’s death, asking for more, Sikes’ death, and Fagin in jail—form a fairly substantial melodrama in and of themselves, and indeed,

these were scenes that Dickens returned to himself for his public readings again and again. With the addition of several more scenes, Oliver's birth, the road, London at first, learning to pickpocket, Brownlow's home, and Nancy confessing at the river, the melodramatic story could be said to be nearly complete. One might think of Cohen's *OT* as a narrative X-ray of the novel, revealing the narrative structures connecting the most essential scenes.

Oliver in the 1930s

Cohen's *OT* integrated these famous scenes much more fully and completely than the silent film, with a sense of narrative flow and interconnection that depended less on theatrical conceptions than on epic ones. The film also drew on the great social sympathy of the Depression, with Oliver taking on the visual metaphoric power of the orphan waif, a common figure both in fiction and reality of the time. Cohen's *OT* still draws on the dramatic scenic patterns of stage adaptations, but adds a great deal in terms of how those scenes interrelate and function as one continuous narrative. The film narrative unifies itself both in terms of connecting scenes and by referencing social issues of the 1930s. In so doing, Cohen's *OT* begins to disengage from the melodramatic mode but without losing the obvious emotional impact of scenes evoking audience reactions while criticizing social conditions in Depression-era America. Ben Singer details five key constitutive factors that define melodrama as a "cluster concept" that encompasses factors more or less present in differing situations. Those features are: pathos, overwrought emotion, moral polarization, non-classical narrative structure, and sensationalism (Singer 44). Those terms at present serve as definitive hallmarks of non-realist narrative; however, melodrama in 19th century narrative often served as a conceit whose purpose was to turn attention towards real life, and the 1930s adaptations accentuated this element. Melodramatic realism, then, might be a better description that more completely captures what Dickens bequeathed to film.

In contrast to Lloyd's *OT*, Cohen's *OT* is constructed from a succession of scenes that clearly attempts to cover much more of the entire sweep of Dickens's novel. To evaluate the reduction of the number and length of scenes should not be the central issue here. What the Cohen's *OT* left out, in particular Oliver's work at the Sowerberry funeral home, amounts to a set of cinematic values. The funeral home would have been considered too gloomy, or even bad luck, by many moviegoers, many of who had only recently taken up the habit of movie going. The tone of dark comedy, too, had not yet

been firmly established in film, so that neither presenting the Sowerberry episode as a serious (grave?) melodrama nor as light comedy would have been appropriate. The ability of film to express irony was not yet as advanced as in novels, certainly as in Dickens's novels.

What does stand out is that even with those scenes cut, the narrative flow of Cohen's *OT* proceeds at a relatively quick pace compared to the lingering, again melodramatic, style of the 1920s. What links the scenes together, though, is the character of Oliver presented again and again, nearly always in the same left-hand side position. Positioned to the left, with a clear view of his face, Oliver's position, like those in painting from the 19th century, offers a vantage point where the character is in, but not of, the main actions taking place. He is participating, but also observing the action. This again reinforces the feeling of the characters as not fully realized, a feeling that Lean manages to improve on. In Cohen's *OT*, Oliver connects the scenes as visual image and melodramatic focus, but does not cause events to happen. This position is a partial substitute for the narrator's point of view. Oliver's reactions move him later into the center, but remain closely tied to what the other characters do.

Oliver's position within the frame of each scene also establishes a moral position, signaling, most often, condemnation and distance. This moral tone or narratorial commentary is what is most often considered as lost in adaptations of Dickens's works. While critics may find this a poor substitute for a fuller narrator's voice, these early film techniques do help to keep the moral tone without making it overtly pedagogical. The links between actions in consecutive scenes is also greatly increased, in this constant positioning of the figure of Oliver in every scene. The viewer sees the action from Oliver's point of view, with an action in the last scene connecting to a new action in the next through his eyes subjectively and objectively through his visual presence. This is not as complex a point of view or cinematic tone as Lean creates, of course, but it is a point of view nonetheless. Cohen's connected scenes bring out the interior of Dickens's story line, but ultimately cannot achieve a level of complexity to do as much as later adaptations do. The basic scenes of the story are replicated and connected by Cohen but become separated from the detailed description, ironic commentary and lingering details that make up Dickens's best prose.

Lean-ing into the Novel

Lean's *OT*, of course, moves the filming of Dickens to another level altogether, in

part by de-emphasizing scene as the basic building block of the film narrative. Neither does Lean rely on the visual presence of Oliver to connect his narrative. Lean works with a more fluid sense of narrative, in which each event and image reflects not only the psychology of Oliver and the social situations in which he finds himself, and in which, differently from the earlier versions, he takes action. If the 1920s narrative seems cellular in its construction, with each scene given its own separate construction, and the 1930s narrative is linear, placing the scenes within a flow of narrative that links them into a meaningful unity, then Lean establishes another dimension to the adaptation, one in which the internal narrative of Oliver is at times expressed and in which the scenes are filmed with a heightened sense of point of view, Oliver's, of course, but the viewer's as well. Interestingly, Lean uses many more shots than any of the earlier directors, yet creates a much more flowing sense of camerawork.

The crucial scene of Oliver asking for more in Lean becomes a frighteningly subjective one in which the camera searches for his interiority even while positioning the camera to offer Oliver's point of view. Scene as a unit becomes less important for Lean as issues of character, motivation, and acting take precedence. Lean, too, manages to create repeated visual motifs whose striking character help to link different scenes more than the comparatively simpler narrative links of the 20s and 30s. In short, Lean adds several dimensions to his film that establish more depth, and one might say, a more novelistic approach. That sense of a novelistic film, though, can also be considered from the point of view of the cinematic novel, which, it can be argued, fits Dickens's works in very provocative ways. Rather than get lost in creating new terms, though, these three film adaptations can be seen from a visual as well as scenic point of view, so it is important to examine the distinction between filmic and cinematic to further tease out the differences in these adaptations more fully.

Filmic and Cinematic

These films from three different eras differ most importantly in the ways that they latch onto different facets of Dickens's narrative and exploit it as a central visual texture of their films. Dickens's novels are extremely visual in terms of metaphors, connections, and the poignant tableau that start many of the scenes and are captured in the illustrations. The trick in making a film adaptation is to use those visual elements not simply as a way of transferring novelistic word to cinematic and filmic image, but as a complex consideration of larger, more abstract levels of storytelling. That is,

Dickens tells his stories in profoundly visual ways that were readily adaptable to film and that affected all aspects of the film production. This visual aspect of Dickens's works operated in two distinct modes when adapted to film. Garrett Stewart argues for a distinction between two sides of Dickens's stories—the filmic and the cinematic:

Filmic Dickens locates the rapid layered succession of his verbal as well as imagistic effects, whereas cinematic Dickens concerns larger, more readily staged (and filmed) blocks of description and plotting. (Stewart 123).

The filmic relates deeply to images that bring out particular meanings in specific scenes, while the cinematic connects to the visual aspects of narrative, montage, and *mise-en-scène* that serve to unify the film by helping to interconnect the scenes. The cinematic would, in particular, help bring the filmic aspects of different scenes into a coherent whole.

To consider this distinction a bit more specifically, the filmic, for example, would be the kinds of images such as the empty bowl that Oliver holds up asking for more. That specific visual image gives poignancy and a visual focus for the scene that can be called filmic. The cinematic, though, is the continuity of the larger visual elements of the scenes, the tables, for example, which are repeated differently in both Fagin's lair and Mr. Brownlow's sitting room, or the arms of Oliver, which become a focus during the pickpocket scenes and are contrasted with Mr. Bumble's oversized, well-fed arms. The cinematic can be considered similar to a visual motif though it serves deeper and more cohering narrative purposes. The filmic is the aspect of the visual that creates metaphoric meanings in particular scenes, while the cinematic is very nearly a metonymic web of interrelated meanings. What Dickens's novels offered to filmmakers of different eras was a great deal of both filmic and cinematic material, however, the filmmakers took up one or another of these elements at different times and in different ways.

Through the silent era to the end of the 1920s, Dickens had been adapted to silent film mainly in terms of the filmic. Early silent shorts were created based on particular filmic images, Marley's ghost, *Nickleby* thrashing Squeers, or Nell's face. These short one-reel films were created from the novel's words that held particular visual richness. When viewing silent film adaptations of Dickens's works, one gets the sense at times of a peculiarly silent current of images that runs through all of the novels that must have greatly impressed readers at the time, and, it should be noted, listeners at the times, since Victorian novels were often read out loud to groups of listeners. The longer

silent films based in large part on stage productions also relied on the filmic elements taken from the novel descriptions and distinctly visual images. The early silent short films aimed at turning the ghost of Marley into a frighteningly “real” visual rendering, while the longer silent films extended the number of scenes without significantly changing this filmic approach. The transformation of word-based visual images into filmic images on screen was not necessarily a simple or easy process, especially considering the technical limitations of film equipment and the level of costume, stage and prop production at the time. The important point here for Dickens’s scholars is how incredibly complex the original novels’ visual images were and how they adapt to film in many different ways.

Lloyd’s *OT* takes an almost leisurely pace in its individual scenes, without trying to cover too much of the novel’s events. That leisurely pace focuses on specific visual metaphors, the road, Fagin’s lair, the first sight of London, and so on. That is, the story is told through these visual images as if a series of one-reel shorts was assembled together. The connections between one scene and the next are not smoothly integrated so much as simply set side by side. Most of these silent films, and surely Lloyd’s *OT* as well, were typically shot in order of the script, often working from rough sketches with less involved planning than later films started to use. Once a scene was finished, one proceeded to the next. That in-order shooting affected the focus of each scene, with lingering shots of Oliver’s face holding up the bowl, for example, that did the work of what would become multiple shots in the work of Lean, for example. That is not to evaluate the film as unsuccessful, but simply to identify the strategy for working with visual images that silent film employs. The construction of scenes was more time-consuming, too, so that each scene became almost a mini-film in itself, with a distinct visual climax in one particular image almost demanded for each scene. The influence of stage productions is also evident in Lloyd’s *OT* as one gets the sense almost of the end of an act after each visual image is presented, rather than a fluent movement towards the next scene as the 1930s films developed. Lloyd’s *OT*, then, drew on the filmic layer of Dickens’s novel most completely.

1930s Cinematic Adaptations

This changed with the introduction of sound and other technical advances in the 1930s, however. Audiences in the 1930s, too, had become more sophisticated in their film ‘reading’ and understandably wanted a different experience than just the

“magical” filmic manipulation of images: They wanted a complete and engaging story. In the 1930s, films were the main attraction, rather than one entertainment among other performances as they often were in 1920s entertainment halls. Movie theaters specializing in movies and movies only became the norm by the early 1930s and moviegoers went there to see films rather than be entertained by new technology. That reception by the audiences created a demand for longer and more tightly connected stories. The 1930s addition of sound also transformed adaptation by including dialogue. However, as the focus of this paper is en-visioning, the important point about sound is that it allowed a very different sort of visual expression to emerge. Medium-shots were the norm in the 1920s, another factor that encouraged the use of strong filmic images, while the 1930s started to use a greater variety of shots, close-ups for important spoken dialogue followed by shot-reverse shot techniques. Camera lenses, too, encouraged variety. Even when medium shots were used, the backgrounds became more complex so that a much larger degree of visual impact could be established, as opposed to the focus on a single visual image on which the 1920s films relied heavily. These innovations led directly to a more cinematic approach.

The mid-1930s conception of film sought to tell a complete cinematic story. ‘Cinematic,’ here again refers to Stewart’s distinction of a larger set of connected filmic images as the main mode of narrative composition. To achieve that cinematic storytelling meant moving beyond singular filmic images or dramatic forms contained within the theatrical stage-based type of scene towards the creation of a more complex blend of elements. Cohen’s *OT* sought to create a cinematic narrative that drew less on particular images as a string of illustrations, and instead turned towards a concept of drawing on Dickens’s cinematic side. That may seem odd to suggest vaguely that Dickens was writing his own screenplay, but the cinematic here relates to issues such as description, setting, plot conflict, repeated visual motifs, editing, and narrative energy. All of these are part of Dickens’s legacy to film narrative. Dickens’s novels, it is important to emphasize, presented these narrative elements in highly visual fashion, making that influence even more relevant. That is, because of Dickens’s narrative complexity and preponderant visual nature, *Oliver Twist* could be adapted to the 1930s style of cinematic narrative just as ‘easily’ as to the 1920s style of filmic narrative.

These 1930s components were not entirely new, but their combination in ever more complex and integrated ways was. Illustrations and stage drama scripts did not provide enough clues for the ever-increasing number of specialists working on the 1930s films. Assistant directors, set designers, acting coaches, and wardrobe specialists, among

many others, needed many more clues, and for that, only the novel itself held sufficient detail, direction and narrative energy to fully inform the emerging cinematic approach. Cohen's *OT* then looked back to the novel for direction in ways of constructing a succession of interrelated visual images. The novel offered these abundantly, of course. With Cohen's *OT*, then, it becomes easier to see how Dickens's novels offered adaptability in the way they rested on a series of linked images that are not simply received, but must be thought through, processed and connected. Lloyd's *OT* aimed more at illustrating already known scenes in the sense of 'making the characters come alive' and did not have as much pressure to create any greater interactivity between film and viewer. However, Cohen's *OT* began to realize a fuller sense of the entire story, within the limitations of the studio system, that answered to the film-going public. The focus became more on integration, connection, repetition and variety than the 1920s.

Cohen's *OT* starts to pay attention to costume, interior sets and more exact details of how the past actually looked, which added another element to the process of adaptation. The attempt to create an accurate historical setting stands as a sharp contrast with the 1920s films. Lean, of course, took the next step with a sense of historical accuracy that was an even larger step towards the extremely mimetic concerns of later adaptations such as the BBC TV productions. The sense of period detail makes Cohen's *OT* a new kind of film conceptualization from the 1920s and moved adaptations towards the kind of period detail that became almost a central feature of many later adaptations, reaching a sort of visual zenith with, for example, Merchant Ivory films. Mike Poole summarizes the 1930s films this way:

A certain *style* of adaptation is, then, emerging: strongly theatrical, lingeringly melodramatic and much concerned with period detail. But it is important not to lose sight of the fact that all these films also radically *re-write* Dickens in their own terms. (Poole 153)

The sense of "rewriting" Dickens shows much about not only the times in which the films were made, but about Dickens himself. The viewers of the films were also likely to be readers of the novels, and yet, the 1930s films began to introduce their own understanding of the novels, rather than represent it in precise terms. The studio system of the 1930s, though, greatly prohibited the extent to which the films could interpret the novel freely. The sense of mining Dickens for different narrative features at each stage of film's "evolution" shows the degree to which Dickens's scenic conception is strong enough and flexible enough to work across many kinds of film.

Cohen's *OT* develops a cinematic approach to the novel especially with its repeated scenes. London in particular is given much more careful treatment, in contrast to Lloyd's *OT* that feels as if it was almost entirely filmed indoors. F.S. Schwarzbach notes in his study of the city in Dickens's works: "This dark London is most intensely imaged in *Oliver Twist* [. . .] in every way the opposite of that city of hope and opportunity" (Schwarzbach 45). The film, though careful with its interior settings, starts to give a sense of London's scale, feel or importance, though not as much as Lean by any means, and indeed the substantiating shots of London are almost all painted backgrounds. However, at least these shots are there. Fagin's lair becomes an important setting that is returned to again and again, while other interiors also create the right atmosphere for criminal machinations. One scene when Oliver is on the way to London is clearly filmed along a country road, but one that could be anywhere. His somersaulting in the puddles, grime and barren road, only to receive nothing from the passengers of a passing carriage, captures well the sense of grim urban reality that Dickens described. However, the story's not yet fully realized setting keeps the drama grounded in characters that serve as visual images that bring the cinematic narrative together.

Lean-ing further into the Novel

However, Lean's later adaptation much more completely moved towards establishing a balance of the filmic and cinematic. This sense of visual realism brings out an important point that further links to Lean's *OT*. The 1920s films drew on the filmic elements of the novel in order to establish a sense of dramatic and metaphoric realism. The filmmakers honed in on the visual images set within dramatic situations that best told the highlights of the novel's story. The 1930s, however, aimed for the cinematic expression of a type of narrative realism that managed to capture much more of the total story, even while moving more fully towards the studio system's emphasis on entertainment. Lean, however, brings these two together into what can be considered a type of psychological realism that emphasizes character, the relation to surroundings, and the visual as a way into the mind of the character and into the nature of social conflicts. Lean blended the filmic and cinematic elements into a critical and individualized statement.

In the case of Oliver in Lean's film, most masterfully accomplished in the scene of asking for more, Lean cannot easily ascribe an evolving adult sensibility or motivation to Oliver, yet his creation of this scene establishes a much more conscious presentation

of internal character reactions and external social conflicts. Lean gives his interpretation of how Oliver must have felt as he walks towards the front to ask for more but also his criticism of the workhouse system. As J. Hillis Miller argues about the novel, “Oliver need not *do* anything to ensure his own ultimate salvation. He need only endure this suffering passively” (Miller 41). However, Lean’s use of a quickly shifting set of shots that look at Oliver, the other children, the adults and then sweep the entire room, give him a sense of passivity that has a point of view and a consciousness. In the novel, as Miller points out, the author’s consciousness is laid on top of the consciousness of Oliver (Miller 37). However, in Lean’s film, Oliver’s consciousness is laid on top of the visual images that he confronts. The sense of Oliver’s consciousness that derives from the narrator’s voice in the novel is removed from the film, of course. However, Lean connects the character’s consciousness with the actor’s bodily presence, rather than attaching it to any other narratorial presence. Lean then goes on to complicate things further by using the visual images to construct a sort of interiority for the character of Oliver in his visual reactions to his situation.

To contrast the three films more fully, then, it is important to distinguish how each of the films considers the visual and what it draws on from the novel. In Lloyd’s *OT*, the asking for more scene focuses on Oliver as a visual metaphor. In Cohen’s *OT*, the scene becomes an important step in the plot that connects to later narrative developments and other scenes. However, in Lean’s *OT*, this scene uses visual images from multiple perspectives to construct a sort of reacting consciousness in the character of Oliver. This perspective serves less as a visual metaphor or plot element than as a narratorial device that connects the film viewer more fully back to the novel and allows for the many criticisms, direct and indirect that he makes. Without this central scene being filmed in just this way, the themes of social injustice, longing for a historical past, and continued unfairness would have had much less sting. Lean has been universally and justly praised for his film, but it is in the establishment of a blend of filmic and cinematic elements into a new style of adapting that deserves the greatest praise, as well as calls for much greater investigation and consideration.

Conclusion

It should be noted, though, that Lean had many adaptations to draw on when making his own. Each of these ways of en-visioning Dickens though deeply relate to the technological limitations, the film production system and the social attitudes of the

times in which they were made. Bernard F. Dick in his influential *Anatomy of Film* notes, “Adaptation is *a* version, not *the* version” (Dick 254). Furthermore, it is always *a* version in *a* specific time and place. What emerges from looking at these three films together is that Dickens’s worldview is still highly relevant. Even when the visions of his work are limited by various localizing factors, the impact of his universal visual images is still profound. A little boy asking for more is not just a well-filmed scene, one of several cinematic elements or just a way of establishing a consciousness of reality, it is a scene that continues to have impact, meaning and complexity for adapters, readers and viewers in the current historical moment and is also likely to continue doing so for some time to come.

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