

We Ask for More: A Note on Polanski's *Oliver Twist*

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Readers of *The Dickensian* will be aware of Leon Litvak's review of Roman Polanski's *Oliver Twist* (Winter 2005, 252-55). Litvak also reviewed the film for the *Dickens Quarterly* (December 2005, 261-67), and although the conclusion of the latter piece is accompanied with more qualifications, on both occasions he expresses a favourable opinion, praising the film's interior design and performances, especially that of Sir Ben Kingsley: 'It is, in many ways, true to the spirit of Dickens's original, but enhances it with a fresh approach that should satisfy casual movie-goers and serious Dickensians alike' (*Dickensian*, 255). My view is less enthusiastic, and I wish to offer some more detailed observations, prompted partly by the recent release of the DVD of the film.

In the interview included in this DVD Polanski says he wanted to make 'a film for my children.' This wish on the director's part may have been largely responsible for the film's colourless, unexciting style, which I think is a great mistake for *Oliver Twist*. Indeed, what is most disappointing about this new film is that it is lacking in the kind of excess that we associate with Polanski; something that made films like *Repulsion* (1965), *Macbeth* (1971), *Chinatown* (1974) and *The Tenant* (1976) so memorably unique. One wonders if that distinctive texture now belongs wholly in the past for him. While there was still the fascination with tortured psychology in *Bitter Moon* (1992) and *Death and the Maiden* (1994), they were visually indifferent. The most highly regarded of his recent films, *The Pianist* (2002), was, given the subject matter and its personal resonance, strikingly restrained. Perhaps this change can be seen to have occurred when he adapted Hardy's *Tess* (1979), in which some of the melodramatic elements of the original novel were conspicuously absent: the wagon-horse Prince's death, Angel's sleepwalking, Alec's sudden appearance from the tomb, etc. Unfortunately, the method adopted for *Oliver* is very much a continuation of this approach.

In the interview Polanski does not refer to David Lean (Carol Reed's *Oliver!* is the only other version mentioned), but the comparison is inevitable, and nearly fatal. Dickens on film needs a vigorous, heightened style and Lean's 1948 version amply possessed it. Several splendid scenes immediately come to mind. In the opening we see a woman walking in a rainstorm, and her pain is reflected in the wind-warped form of the briars. The camera captures the workhouse boys from a high angle so that the spikes of the wall are seen to threaten them. The cinematic possibilities Sergei Eisenstein saw in the novel ('Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today') are expertly

realised in Oliver's entrance into London: the depiction of a busy market in which the cut-away from our hero to the cattle driven about signifies the boy's present fortune, and his placement with a caged bird in the same frame foreshadows his future predicament. In the sequence in which the Dodger leads Oliver to Fagin's den, the shaking screen suggests the hero's anxiety.

Polanski's film, though crafted with highly competent professionalism, has none of this flair, and comparisons of the same scenes almost always show Lean to advantage. Take, for example, Noah's reaction to Sowerberry's caning of Oliver. In both versions we have Noah's sadistic smile, but Lean's camera subtly lingers to record his face changing from smug satisfaction to awe at Oliver's holding back his tears. In presenting the murder of Nancy, while Polanski is content to have the effect (mostly aural) of blood splashed towards the barking Bull's Eye, Lean conveys the horror by the frantic behaviour of the frightened dog. Polanski says he has taken care to preserve Dickens's humour, but if we simply consider the treatment of Bumble, Lean's superiority is apparent. In order to show the unhappy state of the parochial officer's marriage he has the enormous Francis Sullivan sit on a tiny chair, where he finds himself uncomfortably sitting on his wife's knitting needle, which he immediately throws away in a miff—a brilliant touch I'm sure Dickens would have loved.

It must be added, however, that Polanski's film is not without interesting elements. A case in point is the scene in which the children in the workhouse try to decide who is going to ask for more. Here the lots are made of shreds of oakum, and the one who draws the shortest loses. This is a neat pun on 'picking out the oakum'—there is an earlier scene which shows this is what the boys do there. Also, one is pleased to note that the chimney sweep Gamfield (who did not figure in the Lean film) makes an appropriately grotesque appearance.

Litvak no doubt speaks for all in commending Sir Ben Kingsley's performance. In his view, unlike Alec Guinness, 'Kingsley humanises the character' and 'there is some genuine warmth' in the relationship between Fagin and Oliver (*Dickensian* 255). To be sure, this Fagin attends to Oliver's wound, giving some sort of 'magic' ointment. The boy thanks him for his 'kindness', and at the final encounter in the condemned cell says to him, 'You were kind to me.' What is interesting, though, and admirably conveyed by Kingsley, is the duplicitous nature of this 'kindness'. (In saying that Fagin gives Oliver 'one of the film's central moral lessons' (*Dickens Quarterly* 266)—about ingratitude being the greatest sin—Litvak may be right, but he simplifies matters a trifle.) When Sikes says he is going to kill Oliver so that he won't squeal, Fagin agrees that 'It's for the best.' His 'kindness' derives from his thinking that if he

should get caught Oliver will speak for him. In his attempt to evacuate his den after Sike's murder is disclosed, Fagin desperately gathers his property and runs out, leaving the sleeping Oliver behind. Then he does a double-take and comes back for the boy. (Litvak says Fagin 'is continually seen from Oliver's point of view' (*Dickensian* 255), but the last two scenes mentioned above show that he is not quite accurate.) This is a curious moment, but I believe it is meant to indicate Fagin's calculating nature, for soon after when his gang is besieged, he says of Oliver, 'He's our bargaining tool.'

In contrast to this, Polanski presents the kindness of a pure nature. Oliver, after escaping from Sowerberry's, encounters an old woman, who helps him out of benevolence. This character appears in Ch. 8 of the book: 'the old lady, who had a shipwrecked grandson wandering barefoot in some distant part of the earth, took pity upon the poor orphan, and gave him what little she could afford' As far as I know, Polanski is the very first filmmaker who puts her on screen. I venture to guess that he does so because he has taken to heart the passage which describes this woman and another kind soul, 'a good-hearted turnpike-man': 'In fact, if it had not been for [them], Oliver's troubles would have been shortened by the very same process which had put an end to his mother's; in other words, he would most assuredly have fallen dead upon the king's highway.'

To back up this conjecture, I want to draw attention to the streamlining of the plot in this film. Like Lean, Polanski drops the entire Rose Maylie strand of the story. He even goes so far as to eliminate Monks, with the result that Brownlow is no relation of Oliver's at all. This, I take it, is crucial for the director's vision: Oliver survives only because total strangers help him. With this understanding, one begins to see a significant continuity between Polanski's *Oliver Twist* and its immediate predecessor, *The Pianist*, in which exactly the same point is made with a helpless Jew for the protagonist. Watching the latter film one gets the impression, as Clive James did, that the titular character manages to avoid the holocaust, not so much thanks to his musicianship as from sheer luck (*TLS*, 31 January 2003). And in *Oliver*, too, Polanski reinforces this feeling by repeatedly showing the hero in luck at critical junctures; he twice escapes from the evil hands of Sikes—once when a running carriage obstructs him, and once when the thief happens to slip and fall into the river.

Thus, to see this film in conjunction with *The Pianist* allows another dimension to our appreciation. To recognize this, however, is not to deem Polanski's as a successful adaptation of the Dickens novel. I, for one, firmly stand by the Lean version for its cinematic brilliance.