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Research Article

Literature

Dickens to Lean: From Great Expectations to Great Adaptation(s)

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Abstract

The first part of this paper focuses on a close reading of certain episodes from book two of Dickens's Great Expectations as it is here that the reader encounters Pip's descriptions of, what is for him, a new world at their strongest. Three aspects of the way Pip describes this new world are at the centre of this analysis: Pip's experience of urban space, the way it affects those around him, and the aspect of class. These observations will give an insight into the highly cinematic Dickens's world, which has been a subject of many adaptations. Probably the best is David Lean's adaptation of Great Expectations, the focus of the second part of the paper, which elaborates on cinematic strategies devised by Lean to successfully adapt the novel, ranging from chiaroscuro cinematography and evocative sets to a careful balance between realistic and Gothic elements.

1. Introduction

The works of Charles Dickens still continue to elicit a vast array of critical responses. His works are of interest to scholars ranging from narratologists, new historicists, feminist critics and sociologists of literature. Charles Sanders is one of many literary historians and critics to have made the claim that a new phase was inaugurated by Charles Dickens when *Bleak House* was first published in the years 1852-1853. This novel, Dickens's most experimental work, was followed by *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-61), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), which remained unfinished at his death. According to Sanders, what became increasingly characteristic of the works that were written in this almost twenty year period was a "gloominess of tone" and "a determining theme of frailty and mortality" (2003, p. 30). Terry Eagleton has much of the same to say of these works, especially the later ones, and goes on to claim "that the mood of the late novels is distinctly darker", and that despite his adherence to Victorian conventions that a novel should never end in tragedy, in his last works "he is pushing the limits as far as he dares" (2005, p. 109). Yet what is ultimately characteristic of Dickens is still essential to these works from 1852 onward, as can be seen in the following quotation, in which the determining quality of *Great Expectations* is also marked out.

In an essay published in 1902, the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, after a series of appreciations of Dickens's works, from *Sketches by Boz* onward, had this to say on *Great Expectations* in his concluding paragraph: "he alone could have reconciled the strange and sordid horror with the noble and pathetic survival of possible emotion and repentance" (cited in Bloom, 2010, p. 103). There are two important elements of this novel which Swinburne takes into consideration here: firstly, he sees *Great Expectations* as the summation of Dickens's accomplishment in literary art as it includes all that many consider to be typical of his work, only that here it is used with the greatest success; it is nothing new to note that the sordid is a constant feature in his work and that horror also plays a part.[1] But we must consider Swinburne's statement a little more closely: as is proven by the statements which precede the one we have cited here, this singular admixture is not only to be found in the atmosphere of certain episodes in this novel, but in its characterisation as well, and this not only in its supporting characters (a common trait in Dickens's work) but in the central character of Pip himself.

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[1] One only need recall the wasted life of the dilettante poet Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House* as an example of the sordid, and the murder of Nancy at the hands of Bill Sikes in chapter forty eight of *Oliver Twist* as an example of horror.

What also must be added here is that this was the third instance of Dickens's making use of first-person narration. Dickens's first use of this was in *David Copperfield* (1849), while *Bleak House* includes two narrators: an omniscient narrator and Esther Summerson. Dickens had, in fact, decided to re-read *David Copperfield* before sitting to write *Great Expectations* as he wanted to make "no unconscious repetitions" (cited in Sanders, 2003, p. 37), and also claimed of the earlier work that he was "affected by it to a degree you would hardly believe" (ibid., p. 37). According to Sanders the primary differences between these two novels are twofold as "Pip comes from a far lower social class than David and is promoted to the status of 'gentleman' by mysteriously coming into a fortune rather than earnestly labouring to overcome his disadvantages," and secondly in the way the novel ends as Pip unlike "David... ends his narrative with a sense of disappointment... " (ibid., p. 37).

This part of the paper will concentrate on several episodes in book two of *Great Expectations* exclusively. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the sheer length of the work, and the complexity of its plot would require a paper of greater length, and secondly, and this is more important, it is book two in which the themes of Dickens's work find their greatest articulation: the numerous encounters which comprise it provide the reader with a deeper view of Pip's interiority, as well as allowing the reader to see how Pip reconstructs experience through language. The themes that will be analysed here are those in which we believe that Pip shows a particular insight or particular misunderstanding of the situation at hand. Dickens's portrayal of Pip's retrospective narration provides a great challenge to any reader of this work, as any second re-reading of *Great Expectations* will prove: we will apply a close reading on these selected passages in order to illuminate episodes in which we believe the qualities of Pip's memory are at their most enigmatic and how these episodes contribute to the major themes of this novel as a whole.

Great Expectations has been adapted many times, but David Lean's version from 1948 is considered the most successful. The second part of the paper will concentrate on the particularities of adapting literature to film, and pay special attention to Lean's adaptation. The first part concentrates on Dickens's text, elaborating the qualities of Pip's retrospective memory, and his (un)reliability as a narrator which will provide proof of the darkening of Dickens's vision as a novelist. This will be divided into three sections; in the first, the theme of Pip and the city will be discussed, focusing on his first experience of modern urban space, providing an apt metaphor for Lean's juxtaposition of the countryside and the city. The second section, dealing with the new society in which Pip will now interact, discusses the impact of this urban space on Pip's life and the life of others. The third section takes into consideration an episode in which Dickens's qualities as a writer are in full display and the theme of class will also be discussed here.

The second part of this paper discusses the visual transfer of these elements, and the way Lean managed to find their optical equivalents, including the overwhelmingly Gothic mood of the adaptation. After a brief consideration of the process of adaptation in general, David Lean's oeuvre will be discussed, analysing the special visual quality evident in his works. The final part of this paper elaborates the visual strategies in Lean's adaptation.

2. Pip and the City

As mentioned earlier, all events in *Great Expectations* are narrated through Pip's eyes, so that the reader is constantly aware of his character and of his (in)ability as a plausible narrator. One episode which is particularly telling is the one in which Pip narrates his arrival at London in the first chapter of the second book of *Great Expectations*. Having just left Jaggers's office, where Jaggers is to inform him of the terms upon which he is to comply so that he does not forfeit the income provided to him by an anonymous benefactor, Pip ventures out into the street in order to take a closer look at an urban landscape which has, thus far, been completely unknown to him. His impression of Smithfield is the following:

> *So, I came into Smithfield; and the shameful place, being all asmear with filth and fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me. So I rubbed it off with all possible speed by turning into a street where I saw the great black dome of Saint Paul's bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate prison. Following the wall of the jail, I found the roadway covered with straw to deaden the noise of passing vehicles; and from this and from the quantity of people standing about, smelling strongly of spirits and beer, I inferred that the trials were on. (Dickens, 2003, p. 165)*

What Pip experiences here is a series of powerful contrasts; the 'filth', 'fat', 'blood' and 'foam' which cover the roads and the pavements are not to be taken as a sign of urban decay but as the remnants of the constant movement of the traffic of business. Pip's sense of shock upon encountering this for the first time is expressed by his use of the adjective 'shameful' in order to describe this. By placing these words in the mouth of Pip, Dickens achieves contrast: Pip's income should, taken at first glance, allow him the possibility to forget his lowly origins, experience a re-birth of sorts, and move up in the world, but what Pip sees in this place of great expectations and promise is the detritus of urban life, survival, and the sources of a working man's income. Pip may now have the finances to allow him to rise above such business but the reader is made aware that he will now experience things that he would have never seen in the marshes which form the landscape of Kent, despite how lowly his origins were, nor will it be necessary for him to face the man or woman who leaves such detritus behind.

It is also likely that this contrast has been used here as a premonition of what will eventually turn out to be Pip's fate during much of the second and third books of *Great Expectations,* in which we find him almost constantly moving back and forth between London and the marshes of Kent. Pip has witnessed an urban scene here which has alienated him from this city almost as soon as he had arrived and, throughout the remainder of this novel, Pip is never to feel entirely at ease in London, despite his income. Writing on the theme of the city in Dickens's work, and on the late fiction in particular, Murray Baumgarten states: "For Dickens London is not only a conflicted city, in transition, but one whose explosive urban vitality depends upon the yoking together of its contradictions" (2001, p. 112). We must note here that it is these contradictions which Baumgarten has cited, that Pip has actually witnessed. In Jaggers's office, besides being informed of his income, he is also told that he is not to inquire further into whom his benefactor might be; the institution of law here does not provide Pip with information that is entirely transparent and leaves Pip with the feeling that something entirely amiss is at its core. Pip also finds himself bound to the terms of this agreement with so much remaining unsettled, and if his first experience of a metropolis was an alienating one, his life in London will also find him growing increasingly estranged from Joe and the forge, with Estella constantly out of reach.

There are more aspects of the urban landscape which require comment here. Pip, almost simultaneously, sees two institutions representative of a nation's power (and quite often its sense of identity). Pip sees the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral 'bulging' from behind Newgate prison. For Pip, having just arrived from a much smaller community, both must have seemed to him like architectural wonders, but they actually stand in stark contrast to one another; one building representing salvation while the other represents perdition. We must bear in mind, also, that it is in Newgate prison that Pip's great expectations come to an end with the capture, trial and death of Magwich within its very walls in chapter seventeen of book three toward the end of this work. St. Paul's Cathedral is never mentioned again in this novel while, as we have just mentioned, Newgate prison is. This also throws light on the nature of Pip's spiritual development which has been particularly hard won: *Great Expectations* definitely belongs to the tradition of the 'Bildungsroman', yet it is not only that the progress of its main protagonist is set against an ultimately urban background, but that it is also entirely secular, which is further evidence of the influence of the (then) modern urban scene on the life of a protagonist: it bears the definite mark of the 'transition' mentioned by Baumgarten in which the desire for self-determination (paradoxical in Pip's case as his income comes from elsewhere and from an unknown source) is promised but can be just as easily thwarted.

In one of the most comic episodes in this work, we encounter an episode in which we find a wide range of central themes rapidly juxtaposed against each other. In chapter four of book two, we find Pip's first description of a London family and it is also his first opportunity to gain knowledge of the background of his friend and fellow lodger Herbert Pocket. Despite first meeting Herbert in Satis House in chapter eleven of book one, this is the first time that Pip gains insight into Herbert's direct family. With more than a hint of sarcasm, Pip narrates what Belinda Pocket (Herbert's mother) claims to be her origin:

> *I found out within a few hours, and may mention at once, that Mrs. Pocket was the only daughter of a certain quite accidental deceased Knight, who had invented for himself a conviction that his deceased father would have been made a Baronet but for somebody's determined opposition arising out of entirely personal motives - I forget whose, if I ever knew – the Sovereign's, the Prime Minister's, the Lord Chancellor's, the Archbishop of Canterbury's, anybody's – and had tacked himself on to the nobles of the earth in right of this quite suppositious fact. (Dickens, 2003, p. 189)*

Pip's use of the phrases 'quite accidental' and 'invented for himself' are a clear indication that he sees no truth in Belinda Pocket's story and also that there is obviously much self-flattery in it. It is also in line with what Baumgarten had claimed was the 'conflicted' nature of the modern urban space in the novels of Charles Dickens. Although this is something that Pip cannot know (as this is something that we never find in his ruminations although we have seen one of his impressions of the urban scene a little earlier), Belinda's story reveals a sense of bewilderment and dismay in a world of ever more rapidly encroaching modernity; the imagined family past which she has recalled is one which is based on a series of traditional institutions which the forces of modernity will eventually erode. She also cannot see her current state in legal, economic or personal terms: Matthew Pocket, unlike Pip, had left the provinces to make his fortunes in London, and although his earnings are enough to maintain a household, the threat of complete financial loss is always close by, and yet she would rather imagine that it is the result of an intrigue among personages that could wage an unquestionable power in the world at large. Pip's and Estella's origins are shrouded in mystery and Pip is almost constantly trying to uncover them, while Belinda desires a mystery surrounding hers. Belinda has inherited, in a certain sense, several falsehoods, whereas it will be later revealed to Pip how uncertain, sordid, and destructive origins can be, and it is if the knowledge he eventually gains of them also turns out to be part of his inheritance.

3. Pip and Others – Knowledge and Ignorance

Having become a 'gentleman' thanks to this income, Pip no longer has to work, but what is particularly striking in this novel is that we rarely, if ever, read in any great detail of Pip's education in London (under the guidance of Matthew Pocket) or any of his attempts to cultivate his sensibility[2] so that the reader will rarely find any of Pip's impressions of artefacts: it is evident that he has read *Hamlet* though, as he clearly references this play in chapter twelve of book, when attending a rather shabby performance of it in which an old acquaintance, Wopsle, has the leading role. Besides this there are also a number of literary allusions and citations in this book as well. What actually constitutes his life as a 'gentleman' is largely marked by boredom, and Pip is never entirely free of his sense of guilt for ignoring Joe and Biddy (which is a theme that has been the preoccupation of much criticism of this novel), and Estella is constantly in his thoughts. It is for these reasons that we will now turn to two passages in chapter fifteen of book two; the first is the one in which we are provided with insight into Pip's new social life:

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[2] He asks Herbert to teach him how to be a 'gentleman', yet we never read of what it was that Pip was actually to learn.

> *So now, as an infallible way of making little ease great ease, I began to contract a quantity of debt. I could hardly begin but Herbert must begin too, so he soon followed. At Startop's suggestion, we put ourselves down for election into a club called the Finches of the Grove: the object of which institution I have never divined, if it were not that the members should dine expensively once a fortnight, to quarrel among themselves as much as possible after dinner, and to cause six waiters to get drunk on the stairs. (Dickens, 2003, pp. 272, 273)*

As in the passage we had cited earlier, Pip's sense of irony is again apparent in the first line: he has just begun to find himself in debt which is far from 'great ease'. Besides this, the role that Pip had originally intended for Herbert (to teach him the ways of a 'gentleman') has been reversed so that Pip realises that Herbert is actually imitating him. There is another even greater irony here but in order to understand it one must recourse to chapter eleven of book one in which Pip receives a blow from a boy who later turns out to be Herbert Pocket. Now it is Herbert who is looking up at Pip as if he were the stronger but has found himself without any knowledge to impart and in the passage cited here it is evident that Pip's ironic tone actually evinces that his life as a 'gentleman' is empty and without any real purpose. Membership in this club is based on 'election' which obviously means that it based on wealth and social standing. Pip's brief comment on the waiters who get drunk on the stairs is also a comment on the fact that he is aware of social differences. The following passage from the same chapter is worded more sparsely so that Pip's feelings of dissatisfaction, boredom and dismay are given a greater directness:

> *We spent as much money as we could, and got as little for it as people could make up their minds to give us. We were always more or less miserable, and most of our acquaintance were in the same condition. There was a gay fiction among us that we were constantly enjoying ourselves, and a skeleton truth that we never did. To the best of my belief, our case was in the last aspect a rather common one. (Dickens, 2003, p. 274)*

The life of a 'gentleman' is presented here as a series of empty gestures that are to be exacted by the individual and by the collective of which this individual forms a part. The 'truth' behind this kind of life is expressed as if it were a form of death (the 'skeleton truth' to which Pip refers), yet it is of a specific kind. The members of this club are, at first, affiliated by financial standing alone and also belong to a certain social class, there being no other real motives here for them to do so. Yet Pip has seen under the surface of this and realises that this is something his acquaintances do not want to admit. The 'skeleton truth' is that they are spiritually dead as they have no real sense of moral purpose. One could even make the further claim that the realm of the aesthetic is something which remains beyond their grasp due to the fact that Pip describes them (and himself to a certain extent) as being empty at the core.

More insight into what we have been discussing thus far will come to light if we move back to chapters ten and eleven of book two. In chapter ten Pip finds Orlick employed as Miss Havisham's servant and, what is of even greater importance for the novel as a whole, he finally sees Estella again after a period of several years. After stepping outside to take a walk around the garden, Pip discovers that her recollections of the time they spent together as children are few and he is taken by a sense of shock. What is even worse for Pip is that Estella, obviously sensing Pip's amorous feelings for her, discloses certain truths about herself that can only but disturb Pip:

> *"You must know," said Estella, condescending to me as a brilliant and beautiful woman might, "that I have no heart – if that has anything to do with memory."*

> *I got through some jargon to the effect that I took the liberty of doubting that. That I knew better. That there could be no such beauty without it.*
> *"Oh! I have a heart to be stabbed in or shot in, I have no doubt, " said Estella, "and, of course, if it ceased to beat I should cease to be. But you know what I mean. I have no softness there, no – sympathy – sentiment – nonsense."(Dickens, 2003, p. 237)*

Pip, at first, understands Estella's statement as being one which had been prepared beforehand as something that would almost certainly be uttered by a "brilliant and beautiful woman" in such a situation. Like the episodes we have analysed prior, Pip also sees this as an empty gesture but there is a profound difference here as Pip believes that there must be something more behind this. Pip's obsession with Estella has led him to believe that the nature of his own feelings is enough for him to receive the desired response and this is a form of blindness: Pip is under the illusion of what is stereotypically understood by the word 'heart' and because of this has entirely forgotten that Estella's origins are just as unknown as the source of his income. Pip continues by speaking stereotypically and retrospect has taught him that the use of such language is, in essence, 'jargon'. According to Margaret Flanders Darby Estella's response to this 'jargon' "acknowledges the conventional expectations of sentiment that burden the beautiful woman, while, insisting, first the right to express herself, and, second, the possibility of something better than conventional flirtation" (2010, p. 52). It is not possible to entirely agree with such a conclusion as Estella has given Pip no indication of what 'something better' may be, though one can agree with Darby that Pip cannot rightly hear what Estella is saying and this means that Pip's image of Estella in an idealised future which, for the remainder of this novel, will be at conflict, even after Pip finally learns of Estella's true origins (in chapters eight to thirteen of book three). The link here between the passage we have just cited and the two passages from book fifteen that we have cited prior, is that Pip's life, until the series of revelations of book three, appears as one of suppressed emotions and thwarted 'expectations': Estella admits to Pip that her emotional life is ossified and Pip will see this in the society of those with whom he keeps company as well.

4. Emptiness and Class

The final passage which we will analyse here is one which also reinforces the theme of emptiness which has informed the greater part of this paper. The day after this meeting with Estella, Pip decides to take one last walk through the town of his childhood before leaving for London. While walking through the main street of this town Pip experiences the following encounter:

> *Casting my eyes along the street at a certain point of my progress, I beheld Trabb's boy approaching, lashing himself with an empty blue bag. Deeming that a serene and unconscious contemplation of him would best beseem me, and would be most likely to quell his evil mind, I advanced with that expression of countenance, and was rather congratulating myself on my success, when suddenly the knees of Trabb's boy smote together, his hair uprose, his cap fell off, he trembled violently in every limb, staggered out into the road and crying to the populace, "Hold me! I'm so frightened!" feigned to be in a paroxysm of terror and contrition occasioned by the dignity of my appearance. As I passed him, his teeth loudly chattered in his head, and with every mark of extreme humiliation, he prostrated himself in the dust. (Dickens, 2003, p. 245)*

Trabb's boy can only be regarded as 'evil' as he entirely disarms Pip by letting him know that he does not regard Pip's newfound social status in the least and although Dickens does not provide anything that allows the reader to see into the inner workings of Trabb's boy's mind, Trabb's mockery of Pip is obviously based on two things: a knowledge of Pip's very humble background,[3] and secondly, Trabb's boy can see beyond the "serene and unconscious contemplation" that Pip believes would best 'beseem' him. Yet the humiliation does not stop there; the boy continues to follow Pip, and now accompanied by a friend repeatedly shouts at Pip: "Don't know ya, don't know ya, pon my soul, don't know ya!" (Dickens, 2003, p. 246). Pip's rather hyperbolic reaction to this mockery is just that, and it is for the reader to understand the irony involved in this episode: the reader will notice that the hyperbole of Pip's description of this episode actually matches the theatricality of Trabb's boy's mockery of him. G. K. Chesterton[4] considered this episode to be evidence of a gift unique to Dickens's when compared to the English novelists of 19th century, and also saw in this passage[5] evidence of Dickens's insight into social relations:

> *Pip thinks himself better than anyone else, yet anybody can snub him; that is the everlasting male, and perhaps the everlasting gentleman. Dickens has described perfectly this quivering and defenceless dignity. Dickens has described how ill armed it is against the coarse humour of real humanity – the real humanity which Dickens loved, but which idealists and philanthropists do not love, the humanity of cabmen and costermongers and men singing in a third – class carriage; the humanity of Trabb's boy. (Chesterton, 2007, p. 146)*

At the heart of Chesterton's statement is Pip's attempt to maintain a sense of dignity (a word which Chesterton himself uses) yet Chesterton is also aware this is a dignity very much of the surface, something which Pip believes he must maintain due to his new social standing. The 'humanity' which Chesterton speaks of is the humanity of those whose means of earning their income exposes them to the world of the tangible and the precarious. Although Pip's origins are exactly the same, it is not enough to claim that he cannot acknowledge them: he is in fact blind to them as Pip's response to Trabb's boy perfectly demonstrates. Brian Cheadle sees this as the result of Pip attempting an "embourgeoisement of feeling' (2001, p. 81) ever since he had become aware of his newfound income and goes on to claim that Trabb's boy "reduces Pip's unpracticed *hauteur* by strutting with limbs akimbo, hair twined, and an extravagantly wriggling gait – and by wearing his bag as though it epitomized the straight – jacketing effect of new clothes and good manners" (ibid., p. 82). What this indicates, if we consider the novel in its entirety, is that the world to which Pip now belongs, and it must be stated that he belongs to this new world on the basis of a lawful bind, is ultimately illusory, and that it is so on both sides: Trabb's boy can see through Pip's veneer, and in this passages we have analysed prior, Pip can, in part at least, see under the surface of his new social circle. We claim this only in part as much remains unknown to Pip, much of it because he can no longer acknowledge it.

In conclusion, the following can be said for the passages we have selected from book two of *Great Expectations*: unlike the works which belong to Dickens's earlier phase, the means of narrative in this work explore the various vicissitudes of retrospect. The mystery surrounding Pip's origins has found its counterpart in his (occasionally obfuscated) attempts to come to terms with a set of circumstances which he would have never met in the town of his childhood. In chapters one and eleven of book two we can see Pip attempting and failing to grasp how the modern urban landscape has transformed the life of the individual and has affected the institution of the family. In chapters eleven and fifteen we can see how Pip's elevation in the social scale has affected the way in which he views his origins, peers and those who are socially beneath him, and we have described this as a form of blindness. In chapter ten of this same book, we see how Pip's overpowering hope that he will once find himself in the arms of Estella disqualifies him from understanding that her position in a world is very like his own.

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[3] And this knowledge is easier to attain in a provincial setting like Pip's Kent than in an urban metropolis like London.

[4] Whom many consider to be one of the first writers of note to have taken Dickens's work with the utmost seriousness.

[5] First published as an introduction to *Great Expectations* in 1907.

5. Novel to Film

The process of adapting literary works to film has been one of the most fruitful avenues for the development of film as an art form. As Bordwell notes, one of the major reasons for the transition from primitive to classical cinema, apart from changes in exhibition practices, has been the shift to fictional, narrative films,[6] which could have secured the regular weekly output demanded by exhibitors. The new exhibition practices, in which the feature film gradually became the norm, also demanded raising the quality of the product. Successful plays, stories and novels became the most sought after material, serving as a blueprint for new film productions.

There are many reasons why film and literary critics have paid special attention to the relation between the novel and film. The sheer amount of adaptations[7] proves there is an irrefutable connection between the novel and film. One of the most famous essays dealing with this connection is Eisenstein's analysis of the influence of Victorian literature, namely Charles Dickens, on aiding the development of film syntax. Dickens's parallel narrative strands, visual and scenic transitions and episodic storytelling served as a useful model for creating a visual syntax which was less dependent on verbal, and more concentrated on visual storytelling, as exemplified by Griffith's montage. Eisenstein was especially fascinated by the plasticity and optical quality of Dickens's novels,[8] the "calculated transition from purely visual elements to an interweaving of them with aural elements" (1992, p. 398), their delineation of character, and their parallel story lines which emotionally heighten their tension and the drama. All of these qualities found their way into Griffith's cinema[9] and enabled him to creatively develop the process of editing as one of the most unique and distinctive devices in film.

Although the influence of literature on film is very important and cannot be neglected as a useful discipline of film studies, this relation has been slightly overemphasized. Kamilla Elliott has questioned the dubious practice of privileging the Victorian novel and Dickens as the immediate ancestors of film: "Given its roots in photography, magic-lantern shows, public spectacles theatre, tableaux vivants, and various optical toys, it is highly doubtful that film required the invisible visualities of the Victorian novel to discover its own visuality" (2003, p. 114). This type of chronicling the prehistory of film has clearly neglected the influences of other cultural forms, like painting or theatre, creating an inaccurate and distorted lense through which most film adaptations have been scrutinized. Furthermore, as Elliott argues, "such a lineage gives the literary camp film credits, positioning literary scholars as experts credentialed to discuss films as well as written texts, and to do so using literary methods, methods that tend to favour literature over film whenever they are discussed in conjunction with each other" (ibid., p. 115).

Following this line of thinking, scholars have often focused on the narrative aspect of film, searching for omissions in the process of transposition, claiming its 'infidelity' to the source novel and thus committing a logical fallacy of neglecting the idiosyncratic enunciative properties of the film medium.[10] A much more fruitful approach has been undertaken by Brian McFarlane, who claims that successful adaptation means that "visual and aural signifiers have been found to produce data corresponding to those produced by the verbal signifiers of the novels (1996, p. 82). Along with the literary properties of the source text and the enunciative parameters of the film medium, one should also take into account the specific socio-historical context of the respective adaptation.

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[6] This transition occurred approximately around 1909.

[7] In 1922, 23% of the film output in Britain was based on novels. After that, there had been a gradual rise (26% in 1935, 54% in 1939). The ratio slowly descended, averaging at one third between 1946 and 1950, and settling at one quarter since then. Cf. Marsh, 2001, p. 205.

[8] Eisenstein pays special attention to the analysis of *Oliver Twist*, although his observations may be applied to the majority of Dickens's novels.

[9] Although he was one of the most prolific directors in film history, directing more than five hundred films (eight feature films in 1919 alone), and most widely discussed in the film – literature debate, it is somewhat ironic that Griffith made only one film adaptation of Dickens – the 12-minute *The Cricket on the Hearth* in 1909.

[10] Cf. McFarlane (1996) for a useful distinction between the terms narrative and enunciation. While the plot of the film generally refers to narrative, the film medium uses unique formal and stylistic aspects for transforming the mainly verbal input of the source novel into aural and visual signifiers. The difference between narrative and enunciation roughly corresponds to Bordwell's distinction between the narrative and stylistic aspects of the film medium. An accurate assessment of the success of certain adaptations must also take into account the medium-specific enunciative/stylistic properties of film.

In their seminal *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*: *Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson have successfully examined the socio-historical context of the development of the classical Hollywood film style. While the influence of the novel has also been emphasized, the authors have established a more logical connection between the short story and film. As Edgar Allan Poe claimed, the short story could be read in a single sitting. Because of this, the short story creates a single strong impression and provides an overall unity. This unity of effect achieved by the formal properties of the short story proved to be the most desirable aim of the emerging film medium and, in quick succession, all the dimensions of filmmaking became subordinate to the narrative aspect, which lent unity to all the distinct film devices. Everything that went into the film should advance the narrative element of the film.

Analysing the invisible technique of classical Hollywood cinema, John Fawell has observed that adaptations of literature, particularly serious literature, have never been Hollywood's forte, because they paid too much emphasis on the verbal and not on the visual element. Many of the greatest Hollywood directors preferred adapting a short story to adapting 'serious' literature, which requires a great deal of condensation, often seen as 'unfaithfulness' by literary purists. Hawks and Ford have often avoided plots which were too intricate, and searched for stories with a universal appeal which provided them with enough space for their own stylistic touches. This philosophy was best explained by John Ford who claimed “I don’t like to do books or plays. I prefer to take a short story and expand it, rather than take a novel and try to condense” (Bogdanovich, 1978, p. 107). The greatest Hollywood filmmakers saw it as their task to translate ideas into images, and not vice versa. It is exactly this prism which gives us insight into the process of good adaptation – finding visual equivalents and persuasive enunciative properties of the film medium which will help in recreating the feel and atmosphere of the source novel.

6. Dickens and Lean

Often considered one of the most cinematic of all the novel writers, Charles Dickens has always been one of the most popular choices for adaptation. Eisenstein's remarks about the special optical quality of Dickens's novels have clearly recognized the visual impact of his works. The first Dickens adaptation was made in 1897, at the dawn of cinema, when the Mutoscope Company adapted *Death of Nancy Sykes*.[11] *Oliver Twist*[12] and *A Christmas Carol* were among the most-filmed literary works in history, outrivalled only by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Dickens was so popular that British producers made no less than five adaptations of Dickens in 1925 alone. Even a cursory glance at the history of successful Dickens's adaptations would cover the entire length of this essay, ranging from Hollywood's 1934 version of *David Copperfield* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, (1935), to *Oliver!* (1968) and *Little Dorrit* (1987). However, it it very difficult to object to the claim that the best two adaptations of Dickens, and some of the best adaptations in film history, were made by David Lean in 1946 (*Great Expectations*) and 1948 (*Oliver Twist*).

David Lean might have been drawn to Dickens by the pronounced visual element in his character-drawing, the stunning grotesque and Gothic motifs, or atmospheric effects when Dickens described the marshes of Kent or the streets of infernal London. Although one of the most popular British directors, David Lean has never received the critical accolades he deserves. His oeuvre can be roughly divided into two phases – the early, very prolific phase, when he made nine films in the period between 1942 and 1952, and his later phase, devoted mostly to making films of epic proportions, when he made only seven more films in the next forty years.

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[11] Cf. Marsh (2001) for a more extensive overview of adaptations of Dickens's works.

[12] The 58-minute version of *Oliver Twist*, made by the Hepworth Company, was the second feature film made in Great Britain.

Although some of his later films certainly lacked a sense of restraint (*Ryan's Daughter* being the prime example), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, which also belong to the same epic period, are among the best films ever made in Britain. Critics are usually sharply divided in evaluating Lean's cannon. David Thomson especially praises his early films (before 1950) for their sense of pace and modesty, while the films that followed *The Bridge on the River Kwai* seem to him "examples of size and the "visual" eclipsing sense" (2010, p. 560). Likewise, in his often conservative overview of directors, Andrew Sarris puts Lean in the category "less than meets the eye", along with John Huston, Carol Reed, William Wyler and Billy Wilder, accusing him of abandoning the modest virtues of his early films when he started making spectacular epics: "Now that Lean has been enshrined in the various Academies, whatever artistic sensibility he once possessed is safely embalmed in the tomb of the impersonal cinema" (1996, p. 160).[13]

However, the 1999 survey of the British Film Institute, collecting votes by the 1000 leading figures of the movie industry, showed that David Lean was by far the most esteemed British director in history. No less than seven of his films[14] (almost half of his total output) were included in the list, with three films in the top five.[15] David Lean's best films showed a remarkable economy of expression, reminding spectators of the best representatives of the classical Hollywood style, with their perfect balance of action and psychological causality. The successful balance between psychological delineation and spectacular exterior scenes was evident in Lean's career from the very beginning. *Brief Encounter* was very much admired for its economy of storytelling, showing a delicate balance between subjectifying a story-line, with the voice-over narration providing an insight into the inner state of the main protagonist, and the realistic depiction of London during the war, expertly hiding the theatrical origin of its source text. The bulk of the film is narrated through an intricate series of flashbacks, showing the events through the prism of Laura, the main protagonist. A similar subjectification of the story-line is also the main focus of *Great Expectations*, where everything that happens is seen through Pip's first person narration. The other important motif from *Brief Encounter*, as suggested by Brownlow, is the depiction of night exteriors, showing a certain fondness for silent-era expressionism with its pronounced visual dimension.[16]

A similar economy of expression is one of the dominant traits of Lean's adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, his film after the success of *Great Expectations*. A very careful selection of incidents from the novel paved the way to a very selective script, which eliminated subplots and minor characters.[17] Lean's aim was evident – to create a coherent and unified storyline, where each selected element would advance the plot and in this way retain the dominant atmosphere of the source novel(s). This two-fold interest in the story and the visual elements was emphasized by Lean himself: "I'm first and foremost interested in the story, the characters, but I think people remember pictures, not dialogue. That's why I like pictures".[18] This might explain why both of Lean's adaptations of Dickens are so successful – on the one hand Lean managed to produce a coherent story-line, which was in many ways faithful to the spirit of Dickens's works, and at the same time imbue his films with magnificent scenes evoking the often infernal world of the source novels.

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[13] It is interesting to note that Sarris was not so critical of D. W. Griffith's canon, who was safely included in the exclusive "pantheon directors" category. Although *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages* are indisputable masterpieces and milestones of American and world cinema, and although Griffith made some very accomplished films afterwards (*Way Down East* being the best of them), his canon of no less than 35 feature, and almost 500 short films, is full of films which are overly melodramatic and, simply put, bad and unbalanced. However, Sarris failed to accuse Griffith of making impersonal cinema, which makes his assessment of Lean's career all the more dubious. Ford's, Lubitsch's, Welles's, Renoir's, Ophuls's and Von Sternberg's oeuvres, all belonging to Sarris's "pantheon directors" category, are similarly unbalanced.

[14] Only Michael Powell (five) and John Schlesinger (four) had more than three films on this list.

[15] *Brief Encounter* is the second, *Lawrence of Arabia* the third, and *Great Expectations* the fifth on this list.

[16] Robert Krasker, the cinematographer on *Brief Encounter*, studied optics in Germany, which might explain his fondness for expressionist techniques.

[17] More on this process in Phillips (2006).

[18] In the documentary film *David Lean: A Life in Film*.

7. Lean’s *Great Expectations*

When preparing the script for *Great Expectations*, Lean sought to avoid too many characters and too many incidents, so common in Dickens’s novels, replete with coincidences and often unmotivated fortuitous events. As Lean himself declared: “I think the thing is, not to try to do a little snippet of every scene in the book, because the script is going to wind up a mess. (...) Choose what you want to do from the novel and do it proud. If necessary, cut characters; don’t keep every character and just take a sniff of each one” (as cited in Phillips, 2006, p. 105). Apart from the coherent script, Lean was very much interested in recreating the highly visual element present in Dickens. Lean’s first idea was to continue collaborating with Robert Krasker, but he soon found out that Krasker was unable to produce the bleak chiaroscuro effect which he wanted to emphasize in his adaptation.[19] There were many different ingredients which were vital for the success of the adaptation, but Lean’s collaboration with cinematographer Guy Green and designer John Bryan produced just what Lean wanted: to tell the story in a visually stimulating manner utterly compatible with Dickens’s style.[20] The overall form of the film, clearly divided into three separate sections (Pip’s boyhood, Pip’s life in London, Magwitch’s return) shows a steady progression and advances the story-line.

There were several basic aims of the Lean adaptation, all of them equally important – first, to capture the atmosphere of the Dickens novel, which was achieved by the use of chiaroscuro cinematography and the evocative sets by John Bryan, second, to maintain the overall narrative focus on Pip, through whose subjective worldview we experience the events in both the novel and the film. First-person narration found its adequate visual equivalent in the use of voice-over and clever and subjective camera effects. The third aim was to streamline all the other characters in the film through Pip’s prism, making his character “a sort of coat hanger” on which Dickens had draped the entire gallery of colourful characters (cf. Phillips, 2006, p. 108). Stylistically, Lean achieved a careful balance between the realistic and the Gothic, with emphasized melodramatic and fairy-tale elements. As Zambrano mentions in her essay, Lean noticed the multilayered potential of the novel when preparing the script, and he “realized that to a certain extent we had a fantasy on our hands. The characters were larger and more highly colored than in life; and we deliberately kept them that way, because it was part of our intention to make a fairy tale” (1974, p. 154).

The opening of the film, the famous graveyard scene, immediately captured the attention of the audience through its brilliant use of Expressionist techniques, echoing the Gothic undertones of the source text. In this way, Lean had found “a visual equivalent for the fantastic Gothic quality of Dickens’s imagination” (Lodge, as cited in McFarlane, 1992, p. 75). David Lean had spent years as an editor and this experience can be felt in the careful and balanced pacing of the film, achieving the prized classical ideal of a harmonious balance between the different segments of the film. This was also noticed by the British filmmaker Karel Reisz, who told Phillips in an interview that “everywhere in the film, there is evidence that the experience Lean had gained in his years as a cutter had taught him how to build a scene with perfect timing.”[21] The opening graveyard sequence organizes screen space in order to align the audience with Pip’s point of view, where everything is seen through the exaggerated perspective of a little boy.

It might be argued that the opening graveyard scene supports the visual semiotic system of silent film.[22] Everything seems slightly exaggerated, and Lean introduces us to the world of Dickens through very strong visuals. Lean was here able to communicate with the audience, emulating the long-cherished classic Hollywood ideal of narrating without recourse to words and explanations, providing only visual clues which have to be deciphered by spectators. As was also noticed by Fawell "what made silents great is at the heart of what made Hollywood sound films great as well. Showing rather than telling, making the audience active viewers" (2008, p. 56), communicating to viewers through images and turning to silence at the moments of greatest intensity in the film. Apart from Green's cinematography, Lean was aided greatly by John Bryan's atmospheric set designs. Bryan's greatest innovation in the film was "trick" perspective, where he used a fake cloud, painted on glass, a miniature ten-foot-high model of the church,[23] and a stylized and distorted set adequately evoking the young boy's frightened point of view. Supporting the statement that Lean's film evokes the techniques of silent filmmaking, *Great Expectations*, as well as *Oliver Twist*, was cut without reference to the soundtrack (Marsh, 2001, p. 213), showing Lean's indebtedness to the silent films he worked on during his editing phase.

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[19] It is somewhat ironic that Krasker later won the Academy Award for his work in *The Third Man*, producing a stunning chiaroscuro depiction of the gloomy surroundings of war-torn Vienna.

[20] The film received five Academy Award nominations, for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Cinematography and Best Art Direction/Set Decoration. Guy Green won the award for his cinematography and John Bryan for production design along with Wilfred Shingleton for art direction.

[21] Reisz's *The Technique of Film Editing* includes a detailed study of the opening sequence of *Great Expectations*.

[22] The same can be applied to Lean's adaptation of *Oliver Twist* with its opening storm scene of a woman staggering over the desolate moors.

The lighting contrasts of Green's stunning chiaroscuro cinematography and carefully balanced compositions reinforced the subjectification of the story-line, where everything we see is the product of Pip's mind. Lean tried to be faithful to Dickens whenever possible and the overall scheme of the film constantly had to support Pip's point of view. Voice-over narration is deployed from the very beginning of the film and reappears whenever needed. In this way, subjective impressions are intensified and Lean is able to achieve overall narrative subjectivity, echoing Dickens's technique in the novel.[24] Pip is omnipresent in the film,[25] and by deploying this type of narration we are given access to Pip's inner states. Throughout the film, Lean manages to achieve an active correlation between subjective interpretation and enormous settings, clearly the product of an intensified inner vision.

Supporting Lean's earlier statement of Pip being a sort of "coat hanger" for the other characters, Lean was aware that in order to produce a realistic transposition he had to recreate a gallery of extremely colourful characters, which is one of Dickens's great strengths. It would be very difficult to argue that Lean didn't succeed in this respect, because he managed to do so in both *Great Expectations* and later in *Oliver Twist* with the help of some of the best character actors in history.[26] Francis L. Sullivan gave a remarkable performance as Jaggers, balancing the submissive behaviour toward the inferior class with the unexpected broad-mindedness for this type of character. Alec Guiness reprised his role of Herbert Pocket from his own theatrical version of the novel, as well as Martita Hunt, who gave a touching performance as Miss Havisham, anticipating the similar descent into madness of Gloria Swanson as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Blvd*.

Altough there were critics who complained about the inconclusiveness of Lean's ending,[27] even accusing him that he "completely reversed the thrust of Dickens's story" (Barreca, 2003, p. 39),[28] the ending of the film logically corresponds to Dickens's alternate, published ending of the novel, where he decided to end the novel on an optimistic note. It should also be noted that Lean's film was made in 1946, and that the socio-historical context also demanded more positive messages to a greatly exhausted nation. The comparison with *Sunset Blvd.* also brings to mind a great many films of the past which may have influenced Lean. The binary oppositions of night and day, countryside and city, Expressionist lighting and romantic ending, reflect the influence of *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*, one of the greatest masterpieces of silent filmmaking. Atmospheric effects, Gothic trappings and the end of the film, especially when Allan and Gisèle leave the forest in Dreyer's *Vampyr*, find their echo in Lean's adaptations, which both start with stark imagery of a storm and end in the sunlight.[29] By simultaneously creating unforgettable imagery and retaining the most important elements of Dickens's novel, David Lean achieved one of the most astounding examples of replacing verbal signifiers for visual and aural ones, thus creating one of the most successful adaptations in history.

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[23] Cf. Marsh, 2001, p. 213 for an extended analysis of Bryan's techniques.
[24] For an analysis of the subjectification of the story line, cf. Silver (1974).
[25] There are only a few scenes in the film which do not feature Pip.
[26] Robert Newton's interpretation of the vicious Bill Sykes in *Oliver Twist* is certainly one of the pinnacles of film acting. The rest of the crew is almost equally impressive, with stunning performances by Kay Walsh, Alec Guinness, Francis L. Sullivan, John Howard Davies and Henry Stephenson.
[27] Cf Moynahan (1981) or Barreca (2003).
[28] Barreca's analysis of the film is a particularly weak one, centering on the supposedly subversive images of women in the novel and completely ignoring the cinematic qualities of the adaptation.

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[29] The intertextual links could go even further, connecting the traumatic childhood experiences and chiaroscuro effects to *Citizen Kane*, or the motif of the haunted house, as well as the ending which brings the sunlight into the house with *The Uninvited*, an accomplished blend of fantasy and mystery made just two years before *Great Expectations*.

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