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SYMPHONY OF THE CITY: *OLIVER TWIST* AND DAVID LEAN'S FILM ADAPTATION

Literature

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Abstract

This paper compares *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens's literary classic, and David Lean's film adaptation, widely regarded as the best of the many adaptations of the source novel. The first part focuses on two of the novel's relevant topics: firstly, Dickens's depiction of London, which is not only the setting, but also a central facet of the novel, and secondly, on two of the most important characters in the book, Fagin and Sikes, both excellent examples of how Dickens excelled in portraying memorable and larger-than-life characters. The second part of the paper explores similar topics in David Lean's cinematic adaptation. Lean also concentrates on the novel's nightmarish urban setting, which even prompted some critics to call the film *Victorian film noir*. The basic underlying structural element of both the novel and the film is the principle of contrast in which, in the incessant battle between good and evil, villainous characters are punished, while the virtuous are rewarded and triumph.

1. Introduction

Oliver Twist maintains a strange position in Dickens's canon: it has never been regarded as one of his greatest works yet remains widely popular, and although *Oliver Twist* was his second novel, it is not of the aesthetic eminence of his first, *The Pickwick Papers*. As an anonymous reviewer of *Oliver Twist* wrote in 1838, the "numerous readers who have been moved to laughter or to sadness, led to grave reflection, or excited to horror, may ask why they and criticism so differ? The answer will be, that they have been moved by *parts:* we are speaking of the work considered as a *whole*" (Anonymous, 2005, p.43). There are passages of incredible vividness, humour and force in *Oliver Twist* that are as equally great as those in his more mature work, yet the consensus remains that there is something lacking. The novel is not a failure: if this were the case, one could not explain its enduring popularity and the number of adaptations it has inspired.

Even at this early stage, Dickens's workload still amazes us. The serial publication of *Oliver Twist* began in February 1837 in Bentley's Miscellany, while Dickens was still composing parts of the *Pickwick Papers* for the same periodical (Tomalin, 2012, p.29), and as the composition of *Oliver Twist* continued in 1838 (its final installment was published in April 1839), he had already begun his third novel *Nicholas Nickleby.* Inexperience as a writer of fiction (despite the success of *The Pickwick Papers*), coupled with the demands of being a parliamentary writer, young husband and father, as well as having to endure an emotional setback (he also tended to his sister-in-law Mary Hogarth who would die of a stroke in May, 1837) (ibid., p.79), may also explain why this novel's tone is inconsistent: the political circumstance behind this work was the

implementation of the 'poor law' in 1837, and this is reflected by satire in its first half, giving way to melodrama and a series of complex plot twists in its second.

Our attention here will be on the very quality of the verbal texture in *Oliver Twist*, and how this quality manifests itself in two of this novel's larger thematic units: the first being Dickens's portrayal of urban space, and due to the spatial constraints of this work, we will focus on two specific episodes, whereas the second will be on the representation of evil, with focus on Fagin and Bill Sikes. Our analysis will include a close observation of Dickens's use of rhetorical devices, as well as an observation of how dialogue and descriptions of a character's action compare to the descriptions of the space in which these characters are situated in an individual episode.

The process of David Lean's film adaptation of Dickens's *Oliver Twist* has been analysed through several prisms. Before *Oliver Twist*, Lean had made two films – *Brief Encounter and Great Expectations*, his first adaptation of a Dickens novel, which provides much insight into the nature of Lean's storytelling techniques. A mixture of realism and expressionism in the former, and a clear primacy of visual storytelling and Gothic undertones in the latter were important indicators of Lean's stylistic approach. Along with Lean's previous films, an analysis of the art of condensation is also very important. Due to the panoramic approach Dickens deployed, with many subplots and minor characters, Lean had to exclude many sections from the novel in order to achieve coherent and unified narrative progression.

The next section deals with Lean's stylistic choices in *Oliver Twist*, focusing on his economy of expression and his recreation of the bleak atmosphere of Dickens's literary work. The elegant visual language deployed by Lean is greatly enhanced by the work of his two close collaborators – the cinematographer Guy Green and set designer John Bryan. The noirish undertones of the adaptation are also explored in the section dealing with Lean's vision of London, which is a major presence both in the novel and its adaptation.

The final sections deal with the principle of contrast and how Lean's film adaptation also reflected contemporary concerns. The principle of contrast is the dominant element not only of Dickens's work but of Victorian fiction in general and Lean managed to find very adequate and cinematic visual equivalents, especially in the major contrast between the opening and final scenes in the film. This paper concludes with elements of the film adaptation that could be interpreted as reflective of the postwar period when the film was made. The representation of Fagin, problematic in the delicate aftermath of World War II, was the most likely reason why *Oliver Twist* did not repeat the success of *Great Expectations*, Lean's previous film. However, it may be argued that *Oliver Twist* is an equally accomplished adaptation of Dickens and one of the pinnacles of British cinema in general.

2. Street Scenes

London was so central to Dickens's creative imagination that he is quite rightly considered an urban author: his knowledge of the urban space of his time was vast and intimate, and although very personal, so vivid that our contemporary visions of Victorian London are largely his. Besides the abundant humour in Dickens's works, much also belongs to the world of fairy-tale, something that few would associate with urban narratives in which social ills provide much of the impetus.

Terry Eagleton says the following regarding the urban experience in Dickens's work: "If Dickens is an urban novelist, it is not just that he writes about the city, but because he writes about it in an urban kind of way" (2005, p.102). Setting, allusion and an engagement with the circumstances of time and place are embodied by the very textures of Dickens's prose, yet this means more than the mere mention of a mass of people or the din of voices of various social strata. Eagleton continues: "His prose style is alive with the swarming energies of his surroundings, full of hyperbole, extravagant gestures, unpredictable connections, rapid thumbnail sketches, melodramatic exclamations, abrupt shifts of tone and theatrical display" (ibid., p.102).

This is particularly apparent in chapter ten. Oliver is learning the true nature of his "new associates" (Dickens, 2008, p.69), and it is only the second time that Oliver is out on the streets of London. After a botched attempt at thievery, Oliver is in flight: "Although Oliver was brought up by philosophers, he was not theoretically acquainted with the beautiful axiom that self-preservation is the first law of nature. If he had been, perhaps he would have been prepared for this. Not being prepared, however, it alarmed him the more…" (ibid., p.74). That this is one of the many examples of Dickens's critique of how a Benthamite/utilitarian system of ethics was received is well known and has been thoroughly analysed in a "voluminous amount of scholarship" (Mangham, 2012, p.736), yet what concerns us here is Dickens's representation of the modern metropolis.

The shift in tone is abrupt: a scene of rapid action and movement also includes a digression only a paragraph in length and, furthermore, the tone of this digression is satirical, as there is an incongruence between incident and exposition: Oliver, unlike his new 'associates', has not been hardened by a life of crime so that Oliver is not "theoretically acquainted with the beautiful axiom" of a philosophy of "self-preservation". This digression applies not only to Oliver's new 'associates' but also refers to the emotional blindness of the propagators of an intellectual system, so overtaken by the orderliness of abstractions that individual exceptions from an ethics of selfishness are ignored. Behind the satirical tone, this digression also indicates the fleeting interactions in a modern metropolis, where different interest groups (divided by wealth, for example), have become so atomized that empathy can be quite lost.

According to Gillian Piggot, what still draws the contemporary reader to Dickens is "his ability to create incessant movement and variety… his obsession with representing the vertiginous experience… the delineation of urban space with all its strange enigmatic points of connection and disconnection..." (2011, p.187); this is evident from the following:

> 'Stop thief! Stop thief!' There is a magic in the sound. The tradesman leaves his counter, and the car-man his waggon; the butcher throws down his tray; the baker his basket; the milkman his pail; the errand-boy his parcels; the school-boy his marbles; the paviour his pickaxe; the child his battledore. Away they run, pell-mell, helter-skelter, slap-dash: tearing, yelling, screaming, knocking down the passengers as they turn the corners, rousing up the dogs, and astonishing the fowls: and streets, squares, and courts, re-echo with the sound. (Dickens, 2008, p.74)

Dickens uses the present simple to indicate that this is an incident common to urban life (particularly London life), and also conveys his familiarity with such. As in the passage we cited prior, there is a rapid shift in tone indicative of urban life, and the passage does not appear disjointed in the context of what is portrayed.

Rapid movement in space and time is represented here through the use of asyndeton: a multitude of various people is moving from different points in the space allotted to them, either by their respective trade or passage through urban space. If the syntax were the opposite the affect would not be the same. The names of those who are witnesses are of no importance, although their occupations are. Finally, the paragraph ends with Dickens using the resources of sound to evoke actions and movement "pell-mell, helter-skelter, slap-dash: tearing, yelling, and screaming". The first three compound words have definite lexical meanings, yet still possess an onomatopoeic quality. The passage ends with participles signifying sound, providing the verbal texture with greater compactness.

In chapter twenty-six Dickens makes use of similar literary devices as those in chapter ten. Here is Fagin making his way to 'the Cripples': "Near to the spot on which Snow Hill and Holborn Hill meet, opens, upon the right hand as you come out of the City, a narrow and dismal alley, leading to Saffron Hill. In its filthy shops are exposed for sale huge bunches of second-hand silk handkerchiefs, of all sizes and patterns; for here reside the traders who purchase them from pick-pockets" (Dickens, 2008, p.196). Dickens again uses the names of town quarters and writes in the present simple, thus showing familiarity with the city and also providing this night-scene a greater sense of immediacy. Dickens is also acting as guide to parts of the city unvisited by those belonging to polite society.

Furthermore, the present simple in this paragraph also heightens the symbolic value of this scene of urban decay: this scene is symbolic of the moral decrepitude that has allowed a portion of humanity to be squandered, as well as the internal (not only external) misery of those living in such conditions: "For Dickens, London at night was characterized by suffering and criminality" (Keunen, De Droogh, 2014, p.124), and Dickens never forgot that those subject to such conditions were often the victims of unfortunate circumstance. The paragraph ends thus:

> It is a commercial colony of itself: the emporium of petty larceny: visited at early morning, and setting-in of dusk, by silent merchants, who traffic in dark back-parlours, and who go as strangely as they come. Here, the clothesman, the shoe-

> vamper, and the rag-merchant, display their goods, as sign-boards to the petty thief; here, stores of old iron and bones, and heaps of mildewy fragments of woollen-stuff and linen, rust and rot in the grimy cellars. (ibid., pp.196-197)

The present simple is used again, emphasizing the criminal underclass as a subset of the world of trade in the modern metropolis (in Dickens's time London had become one of the world's major financial centers, with industry concentrated in the cities of the north). This is further emphasized by the following: "silent merchants" ('silent' signifying the clandestine), "traffic" (in today's usage a word often associated with contraband, yet this was not the case in Dickens's time), and "rag-merchants". Before Fagin enters 'the Cripples', Dickens describes its interior:

> …as confused as the noises that greeted the ear, might be made out; and as the eye grew more accustomed to the scene, the spectator gradually became aware of the presence of a numerous company, male and female, crowded round a long table: at the upper end of which, sat a chairman with a hammer of office in his hand; while a professional gentleman with a bluish nose, and his face tied up for the benefit of a toothache, presided at a jingling piano in a remote corner. (Dickens, 2008, p.198)

The "spectator" is an assumed personage, yet what is on display are parts and aspects of the modern metropolis unknown to a large segment of the citizenry, and besides this, the relations themselves in this establishment have something of an atomistic quality. There are "thumbnail sketches" (recalling Eagleton) of some of its clientele, and Dickens possessed enough magnanimity to remind the reader that, although 'the Cripples' is a place of low repute, there is still space for the occasional irreverent detail: the "chairman" is obviously someone mocking a person belonging to this particular class, while the brief sketch of the man at the piano, with "his face tied up for the benefit of a toothache" also adds a comic tone.

Yet Dickens does not forget that in such parts of the metropolis the ravages of crime, poverty and exploitation are ever present, and before a return to the purpose of this episode for the plot, he includes the following:

> Cunning, ferocity, and drunkenness in all its stages, were there, in their strongest aspect; and women: some with the last lingering tinge of their early freshness almost fading as you looked: others with every mark and stamp of their sex utterly beaten out, and presenting but one loathsome blank of profligacy and crime; some mere girls, others but young women, and none past the prime of life; formed the darkest and saddest portion of this dreary picture. (Dickens, 2008, p.199)

This is an allusion to the world to which Nancy belongs, yet Dickens never names Nancy's true occupation outright. Humphrey House, in his study 'The Dickens World' (1941), came to the conclusion that there is "one modification in Dickens which stands out above any other – his reticence about what he thought might be offensive… everything was written with an eye on

decency" (1969, p.217). Although openly stating that Nancy is a prostitute went against the literary sensibilities of the period, the reader can easily conclude not only the nature of her occupation, but the occupation of some of the other female patrons in 'the Cripples', also adding to the exploratory aspect of *Oliver Twist*; as C. Bertrand states: "The reader, who is directly addressed, embarks with the narrator on a criminal and accelerated flânerie towards the underworld, with precise names working as realist landmarks…" (2017, p.84).

3. Fagin and Sikes: Entrances and Exits

Dickens's power in the creation of memorable characters is certainly one of the reasons his works have remained popular among common readers and in academia, yet the Dickensian mode of delineating character is difficult to define: "The reader of Dickens stands in the midst of a festival, which is too varied, too multiform, to be taken in even by innumerable readings. Something always escapes our ken…" (Bloom, 2005, pp.95-96). A common misunderstanding is that Dickens's characters lack what is superficially termed 'psychological depth': a lack of inwardness and development. What Dickens offers the reader is something else entirely. Bloom uses "festival" to describe the Dickensian world, a word itself suggestive of largesse. T.S. Eliot, among others, thought much the same. In his 1927 essay, in which he compares character in the works of Wilkie Collins and Dickens (the two of them associates and friends), Eliot states "Dickens excelled in character; in the creation of characters of greater intensity than human beings" (1932, pp.423-424), and also: "Dickens's characters are real because there is no one like them…" (ibid., p.424).

Our focus here is on two characters in *Oliver Twist*: Fagin and Bill Sikes, the reason being that both are supreme studies in evil and violence. As always in Dickens's work, the division between good and bad characters is entirely clear, and the characters who have either perpetrated the greatest evils, or characters of such intent, are duly punished, yet this does not detract from what was greatest in Dickens's literary imagination.

Fagin is introduced in chapter eight, yet before his entrance, Oliver is led by Jack Dawkins to Fagin's abode. The environs along the way are described as follows:

> A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops; but the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of children, who, even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside. (Dickens, 2008, pp.59-60)

This is a subtle premonition of what is awaiting Oliver, also telling us something of Fagin's mode of existence. The suggestion here is that "children" are "stock": their poverty making them rife for exploitation, and the children Oliver hears along the way are those that have not been put to any proper use.

Upon entering, Oliver sees Fagin for the first time and before his name is revealed, Fagin is "over a frying-pan, which was on the fire, and which was secured to the mantelshelf by a string, some sausages were cooking…" (Dickens, 2008, p.60), with "villainous-looking and repulsive face" (ibid., p. 63). Regarding plot, this is perfect coincidence. Fagin's appearance corresponds to his abode and its proximate surroundings, yet Oliver is hungry, some of his trepidation has been alleviated by meeting the Dodger beforehand, and the presence of other boys (bearing in mind that Oliver has seen disheveled children along the way), make it so much easier for Fagin to draw Oliver into his circle, which he immediately does:

> …making a low obeisance to Oliver, took him by the hand, and hoped he should have the honour of his intimate acquaintance… 'Dodger, take off the sausages; and draw a tub near the fire for Oliver. Ah, you're a-staring at the pocket-handkerchiefs! eh, my dear. There are a good many of 'em, ain't there? We've just looked 'em out, ready for the wash; that's all, Oliver; that's all. Ha! ha! ha!' The latter part of this speech was hailed by a boisterous shout from all the hopeful pupils of the merry old gentleman. In the midst of which they went to supper. (ibid., p.63)

Richard Lehan claims that Fagin embodies the Dickensian metropolis in one of its darkest aspects: "Dickens's city was both a lure and a trap: a lure to those who are called to it as if by a magnet, because only the city offers the means of realizing a heightened conception of self; a trap in its workings leading to human corruption…" (1998, pp.39-40). Oliver is only a child, so that he cannot consciously quest for a "heightened conception of self", having fled to London simply to survive, yet he is rife for exploitation and corruption, and this is Fagin's role. Surrounded by boys neither much younger nor older than himself, he cannot help but see something paternal in Fagin who is preparing a meal: his mannerisms put Oliver at a certain ease, and Fagin is the first adult Oliver has encountered to show him any kindness, introducing himself to Oliver as if the two were equals.

Bill Sikes makes his first appearance in chapter thirteen. Fagin and the Dodger are arguing, as they believe that Oliver is in custody, both afraid that this will lead to their eventual capture. Their argument is described thus: "the Dodger snatched up the toasting fork, and made a pass at the merry old gentleman's waistcoat; which, if it had taken effect, would have let a little more merriment out, than could have been easily replaced" (Dickens, 2008, p.94). A sense of play among the inhabitants of the underworld is portrayed, most apparent by the use of an etymological figure ("merry" and "merriment", and as these two words are used in connection to Fagin, the use is ironic), there is also something of the grotesque in this passage as it is Dickens joking with the possibility of Fagin's disembowelment. Sikes's entrance follows not long after: "Who pitched that 'ere at me? It's well it's the beer, and not the pot, as hit me, or I'd have settled somebody" (ibid., p.94). A visual description follows:

> The man who growled out these words, was a stoutly-built fellow of about five-and-thirty, in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half boots, and

> grey cotton stockings which inclosed a bulky pair of legs, with large swelling calves… a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days' growth, and two scowling eyes; one of which displayed various parti-coloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow. (ibid., p. 94)

When introducing Fagin, Dickens evokes the environment of the filth and grime in which he lives, with his duplicity revealed in his first words to Oliver; in Sikes's case there are no such subtleties as Sikes is a representation of the urban criminal underworld at its most brute. Sikes also reminds Fagin that he is capable of exerting a fatal blow: "Mr. Sikes contented himself with tying an imaginary knot under his left ear, and jerking his head over on the right shoulder; a piece of dumb show which the Jew appeared to understand perfectly" (ibid., p.96).

In chapter forty-eight the malignity of which these two characters are capable is fully exposed as this is the chapter in which Nancy is murdered. Fagin's hopes that Nancy would be willing to conspire in ridding them both of Bill Sikes have been dashed, and in the opening paragraph Fagin is awaiting Sikes to inform him that Nancy, in order to save Oliver, will betray them all. Dickens's description of Fagin remains consistent:

> ...it was at this still and silent hour, that Fagin sat watching in his old lair, with face so distorted and pale, and eyes so red and blood-shot, that he looked less like a man, than like some hideous phantom, moist from the grave, and worried by an evil spirit… His right hand was raised to his lips, and as, absorbed in thought, he hit his long black nails, he disclosed among his toothless gums a few such fangs as should have been a dog's or rat's. Stretched upon a mattress on the floor, lay Noah Claypole, fast asleep. (Dickens, 2008, pp.377-378)

Noah Claypole (although a character of utter moral turpitude), is another youth used by Fagin, furthering this aspect of Fagin as false patriarch. As Fagin is now alone, he is not hiding his demeanor in persuasive speech or in a semblance of good humour, and any trace of humanity is almost entirely gone: the description suggests that Fagin is both diabolical and bestial ("phantom", "fangs… a dog's or rat's"). Brian Deutschendorf claims that "Fagin's identity is so closely intertwined with his den, which represents the vile end of London, that he cannot rid himself of the connection" (2005, p. 148), yet by this stage, Fagin's identity in relation to his immediate environment is less relevant, and the focus is on his malevolence. The final words he speaks to Sikes reinforce this: "You won't be – too – violent, Bill? …" not too violent for safety. Be crafty, Bill, and not too bold" (Dickens, 2008, p. 382). Dissemblance is Fagin's essence, while the descriptions of Sikes all emphasise his role as bully and thug, and the description of Sikes's exit adds further contrast between these two characters: "Sikes made no reply…" (ibid., p.382), and it must be noted that the verbal exchange between the two we had cited prior also ended with Sikes's wordless threat.

The murder of Nancy is the most powerful passage in *Oliver Twist*, and Dickens was certainly aware that it displayed his greatest strengths. Within the space of a few paragraphs,

Dickens achieves a perfect tension. Sikes makes his way to Nancy silently: "…looking straight before him with savage resolution: his teeth so tightly compressed that the strained jaw seemed starting through his skin; the robber held on his headlong course, nor muttered a word, nor relaxed a muscle, until he reached his own door" (Dickens, 2008, p.382). Sikes is utterly determined to murder Nancy, and this is emphasized by Dickens's choice of vocabulary and phrasing: observing this citation carefully, one will notice a subtle and evenly balanced shift from movement to bodily attitude and back.

The act of murder is brief: Sikes deals three blows, two with his pistol: "The murderer staggering backward to the wall, and shutting out the sight with his hand, seized a heavy club and struck her down" (Dickens, 2008, p. 303). Sikes covering his eyes before dealing the fatal blow is itself a premonition of the state he will be in while in flight. John Carey, in his seminal study 'The Violent Effigy: A Study in Dickens's Imagination', makes the claim that early "in his career Dickens began to produce narratives in which the figures who are regarded with the most feeling are the murderers" and that although the "conformist part of him repudiated his murderers with horror", the "artist delved with fascination into their responses, and particularly how they feel when hurled down or at bay" (Carey, 1979, p.17).

In the penultimate chapter, Fagin is imprisoned in Newgate and sentenced to death. In the chapter we had cited previously, Fagin's metamorphosis from man to infernal and bestial phantom was at the forefront, but here he is wracked with guilt and regret, awaiting death:

> As it came on very dark, he began to think of all the men he had known who had died upon the scaffold; some of them through his means. They rose up, in such quick succession, that he could hardly count them. He had seen some of them die, - and had joked too, because they died with prayers upon their lips. With what a rattling noise the drop went down; and how suddenly they changed, from strong and vigorous men to dangling heaps of clothes! (Dickens, 2008, p. 429)

The irony here is that Fagin has no knowledge of Sikes's death, and it was "through his means" that it occurred. Fagin was surprisingly reticent during his trial. Corey Evan Thompson claims that this has baffled certain readers ever since *Oliver Twist* first appeared, but that "there exists an underlying criminal code among the thieves in Fagin's circle… Fagin is the code's most ardent supporter; he holds those who adhere to the code in most high regard and severely punishes those who breach it" (2003, p. 147), but now this 'code' is entirely useless as Fagin is imprisoned, crushed by the memories of the many deaths of which he was either the direct or indirect cause and awaiting death. Dickens showed an interest in the mental state of a man condemned to die at an earlier stage in his work in 'A Visit to Newgate', in his first published volume *Sketches by Boz* (1836). Dickens describes the state of a nameless individual: "Conceive the situation of a man, spending his last night on earth in this cell. Buoyed up with some vague and undefined hope of reprieve…" (Dickens, 1995, p. 246), yet Fagin has no hope of reprieve, either real or imagined, and his only truly good act, after being informed by Brownlow (accompanied by Oliver) that Sikes

is dead and Monks has confessed, is that he discloses the whereabouts of documents that will shed further light on Oliver's true identity.

As mentioned in our introduction, the tone of *Oliver Twist* is inconsistent, yet despite this, there is a great consistency in Dickens's use of the resources of language in his representation of this novel's major thematic units: the city and the nature of evil. Dickens's representation of urban space is not based exclusively on mere description of the mass, nor on the mere citation of place names, but on the use of rhetorical figures which are used to embody the very nature of urban experience. Regarding the second unit, Dickens's meditations on the nature of evil are primarily centred in his delineation of Fagin and Bill Sikes, two figures of the criminal underworld, yet both expressing two different (yet equally malevolent) facets of evil. As mentioned earlier, Dickens follows the Victorian convention in his clear separation between good and evil, and in the concluding triumph of the good. The descriptions of both Fagin and Sikes retain consistency, both in dialogue and action, as well as in the allotted spaces in which Dickens has given them both life and death.

4. *Brief Encounter* and *Great Expectations*

The key to understanding Lean's approach in adapting Dickens's *Oliver Twist* lies in his two previous films – *Brief Encounter* (1945) and *Great Expectations*, his previous Dickens adaptation. *Brief Encounter* is an intimate romantic melodrama which showed Lean's ability to capture the subtle nuances of human relationships. Combining a delicate, restrained approach when depicting unglamorous, yet very atmospheric surroundings, Lean manages to achieve tremendous emotional appeal. Robert Krasker's naturalistic black and white cinematography provided the film with a successful mixture of realism and elegant romantic gloom, where shadowy night exteriors often resembled German expressionist films that were the most important stylistic influence on *film noir*. Based on *Still Life*, a short play by Noël Coward, this adaptation also shows Lean's skill in transforming a rather modest play into an elegant and visually arresting film. Featuring impressive performances by Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard, the film is also a model example of economy in storytelling. *Brief Encounter* is important for two more reasons: made at the time when the most popular films in Britain were escapist costume melodramas like *The Man in Grey* (1943) or *The Wicked Lady* (1945), the film showed a new level of realism in British film. *Brief Encounter* was also a very popular film both in Britain and the US, even breaking box-office records in New York,[1] showing Lean's ability to grasp the audience's pulse.

Lean's first film after *Brief Encounter* was *Great Expectations*, his first adaptation of Dickens, which is widely considered the best film adaptation of any of Dickens's works, with the possible exception of *Oliver Twist*, his next film. Both films are excellent examples of Lean's belief in the primacy of the visual element in the filmmaking process: "I'm a picture chap. I like pictures, and when I go to the movies I go to see pictures. I think dialogue is nearly always

[1] Cf. Dyer (1993), Street (2002) and Brownlow (2014).

secondary in a movie. It's awfully hard, when you look back over the really great movies that you see in your life, to remember a line of dialogue. You will not forget the pictures." (Kennedy, 1985, p. 32). In order to convey the dark and gloomy atmosphere of a Dickens novel, Lean knew that he needed a cinematographer who would be able to paint the film with noirish tones, reflecting the Gothic undertones that constitute much of Dickens's work. Dissatisfied with Krasker's effort, Lean employed Guy Green, whom he would later call "'The Prince of Darkness' because of his ability to photograph the depths and densities of black in this dark and shadowy world" (Phillips, 2006, p.139).[2] There are many similarities between *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*, providing these two adaptations with elegance due to Lean's authorial presence. Both films are immersed in an all-enveloping darkness, depicting the harsh conditions of the Victorian period, an era which was often the source of Lean's inspiration, since two more of his films – *Madeleine* (1950) and *Hobson's Choice* (1954), were also set in the nineteenth century.[3]

Both films begin with strong and visually arresting opening scenes, proof that Lean was conscious of the need to immediately capture the audience's attention and his early mastery of visual storytelling. Along with Guy Green's atmospheric chiaroscuro cinematography, the visual style of both films was greatly enhanced by set designer John Bryan's contributions and his innovative and inspired use of the trick perspective, which provided these films with a successful mixture of realism and stylization. The manner in which Lean approached his adaptation of *Great Expectations*, in which he ruthlessly discarded all minor characters and episodes which did not contribute to the steady progression of the plot, was also used when preparing the screenplay for *Oliver Twist*. The aim of both films was not to include all the incidents and characters, but to capture the spirit of the text and produce a visual equivalent of their specifically gloomy atmosphere. There were also telling differences between these two films, and Lean later explained that his aim was to "recapture my impressions on first reading the two stories. I imagined *Great Expectations* as a fairy-tale, just not quite true, and *Oliver Twist* as a grimly realistic study of what poverty was like at that time" (Pratley, 1974, p.76).

5. Oliver Twist and the Art of Condensation

The structure of Dickens's works was very much governed by the format in which they were first presented to his readers. His novels were first issued in monthly installments in periodical publications, where many installments were almost independent and self-sufficient parts of the overall story. This sort of panoramic approach often included many sublots, minor characters and very far-fetched coincidences which are among the weaker parts of Dickens's otherwise impressive portrayal of the harsh realities of the Victorian world. In Lean's calculation, it would have taken ten hours to make a completely faithful, scene-by-scene and chapter-by-

[2] Although this remark refers to Phillips's analysis of Lean's *Oliver Twist*, the same conclusion can be drawn for *Great Expectations* as Guy Green was the cinematographer on both films.

[3] The period from 1946 (*Great Expectations*) to 1954 (*Hobson's choice*) can be called Lean's Victorian period. Only two out of six films made in this period - *The Passionate Friends* (1949) and *The Sound Barrier* (1952) were not set in the nineteenth century.

chapter adaptation of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*.[4] Even in the Victorian period, the stage productions based on Dickens's works were very much governed by the principles of condensation and selection. Whole sections of the novels were excised along with minor subplots and characters.

As argued by Innes (2003, p. 68), there were practically no attempts to adapt the entire novel:[5] "When even as competent a playwright as Dion Boucicault turned to *Nicholas Nickleby*, his title – *Smike* – mirrors the radical foreshortening of the story that was typical for nineteenth-century dramatizations."

If we were to use the old-fashioned approach to the process of adaptation, where utmost fidelity to the novel was the primary criterion, we could argue that Lean's version of *Oliver Twist* also contains very significant omissions. All the chapters that deal with the failed burglary perpetrated by Sikes and his cohorts (among the most convincing parts of the novel), were excluded by Lean. Miss Rose and Miss Maylie, whose country home was an important emotional refuge for Oliver, were also completely omitted. The inclusion of these segments might have given Lean a chance to depict the pastoral idyll experienced by Oliver and explore the dichotomy between the city and the countryside, (a common theme in Dickens's work). Another significant instance is the complete omission of the novel's penultimate chapter, "The Jew's last night alive",[6] a brilliant and psychologically nuanced portrait of the condemned and distraught Fagin in his prison cell. If this scene had been included in the film, it might have had the same profound emotional impact achieved by the ending of *In Cold Blood* (1967), the Richard Brooks adaptation of Truman Capote's novel, and would have also reinforced the Gothic and noir undertones of Dickens's original. These were probably all the same dilemmas faced by Lean when preparing the screenplay. However, although he was aware that he had to sacrifice certain intriguing chapters, his aim was to achieve a flowing narrative where the most important episodes would be included and, at the same time, retain the spirit of the novel, a task he undoubtedly accomplished.

6. Lean's Stylistic Approach

David Lean's remarkable economy of expression, a fact already noticeable in all his previous films, especially in *Brief Encounter* and *Great Expectations*, was mostly shaped by his years of work as an editor[7] and his love of Hollywood films, which were among the greatest

[4] Cf. Phillips, 2006. p.126.

[5] Innes mentions two famous exceptions when adapting Dickens's works. *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, David Edgar's theatrical adaptation from 1980, directed by John Caird and Trevor Nunn, was one of the rare attempts to stage the complete novel. An 8 ½ hour-long adaptation, the play was divided into two separate parts and presented over two evenings. *Little Dorrit,* a 1987 film adaptation directed by Christine Edzard, has a total screen time of 6 ½ hours and, although attempting an all-inclusive approach, was also characterized by much condensation. The film was divided into two parts intended for complementary viewing.

[6] This segment was included in Roman Polanski's 2005 adaptation.

[7] He worked as an editor on many prestigious British films of the period, among them two films (co)directed by Michael Powell – *49th Parallel* (1941) and *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* (1942).

influences on his style[8] When discussing *Great Expectations*, Lean's previous Dickens adaptation, the authors of this paper offered the following brief analysis of Lean's *Oliver Twist*:

> 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. 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 emphasised 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".[9] 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. (Petković, Vunić, 2015, p. 41)

The distinctly visual approach that Lean favors in his films is very much influenced by the famous visual language of the late silent era, where intertitles were used much less frequently than earlier and the bulk of the film's narration was composed in visual terms. Both *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* begin with magnificent opening scenes, another reflection of Lean's fascination with Hollywood film and the strong *in medias res* beginnings often found in them. Lean's aim was to capture the attention of the audience from the very start, creating a strikingly vivid Gothic atmosphere completely faithful to the spirit of Dickens's novel. It is important to mention that the opening scene, where we see a pregnant woman, Oliver's mother, walking across the rain-drenched moor, is not present in Dickens's novel and was used to emphasize the visual aspect of the film. This very atmospheric scene employs an entire plethora of devices influenced by German Expressionist film, from canted camera angles, false perspective sets to Guy Green's complex chiaroscuro cinematography. Such techniques enabled Lean to achieve the visual equivalent of Dickens's dark world.

The most important parts of the film also evoke a nightmarish noir atmosphere, especially the scenes in which Nancy meets Brownlow on London Bridge, the horrifying scene of Nancy's murder and the pursuit after Sikes in the dimly lit slums of East London. The entire London Bridge episode takes place in shadows, and the same somber atmosphere, reinforced by Green's diffused lighting, is present throughout most of the film. Guy Green and the set designer John Bryan were Lean's most important collaborators, who helped him create this dark vision of nightmarish life in Victorian London. These intensely dark moments even inspired Al McKee to

[8] Cf. the following quote from Phillips (2006, p.6): "I had a tremendous love of American films; they influenced me enormously." Undated transcript in the files of the British Film Institute Library.
[9] From the documentary film *David Lean: A Life in Film*.

cite the film as an example of "Victorian film noir" (2000, p. 41). Although Lean's work has often been unjustly termed merely bland pictorialism,[10] his adaptation of *Oliver Twist* is imbued with dark imagery very faithful to the spirit of the source novel.

7. Symphony of the City

Although McKee's designation of the film as an example of Victorian film noir might seem a little far-fetched, there are certainly many elements that can corroborate his claim. Besides the aforementioned dark vision constantly present in this film, both Dickens's novel and Lean's adaptation make use of an urban setting, which is a major presence and almost a character in its own right in both works. Although Dickens's novel also incorporated a contrast between the pastoral countryside and the nightmarish vision of the city with its many dark alleys and slums populated by thugs and criminals, Lean decided to entirely focus on the urban setting and recreate this vision of a dark London transformed by the industrial revolution. As argued by Baumgarten (2001, p.107), London was a major presence in the works of respectable graphic artists such as William Hogarth and George Cruikshank and was also a central protagonist in Dickens's novels. The nineteenth century saw the transformation of London from a city with horse-drawn carts to a major industrial center flooded with immigrants and refugees, and the city became the crucial element of both the setting and the plot in Dickens's fiction:

> Dickens is the first novelist to theatricalize the city, articulating scenes and situations that would in later fiction become an urban convention. Dickens brought the stock-in-trade of early nineteenth-century picture books into his novels. His crowd scenes, like his streets, have a Hogarthian vitality, swarming with character types and dramatic situations that are snapshots of experience in motion. (ibid., p.113)

Dickens borrowed not only from Hogarth and his tradition of realistic and graphic representations of urban scenes, but also from his own experience. When he was only twelve, Dickens worked in a shoe-blacking factory to help support his family.[11] This traumatic event had a profound influence on Dickens's later fiction, where he would often focus on the destinies of abandoned children and orphans, and his novel *Oliver Twist* certainly contains some autobiographical elements. His experience as a newspaper reporter was important as well, and here he would often contribute short sketches focusing on the urban middle class, where his powers of observation were already evident. At night, he would often roam the streets of London, which provided him with much indispensable matter for his writing. Dickens enjoyed living in London and the city always appeared as a vital force in his novels. It is therefore understandable that Lean chose to highlight the London setting of the film, skillfully recreated by Bryan's set design and Green's cinematography.

[10] Cf. Sarris, 1996. pp.159-160.
[11] Cf. Patten, 2001, p.16.

> Bryan turned to the etchings executed by Dickens's illustrator George Cruikshank to help him conjure up the moody and threatening atmosphere that surrounds Fagin and his gang in their underworld haunts. With Cruikshank's vision in mind, he designed dark and forbidding sets for the East London slum neighborhood where Fagin's hideout is located in a run-down tenement. A bridge with the London skyline in the background leads to the ramshackle tenement building. Bryan created "a masterly design of chimney pots, rooftops, menacing shadows, smoke, and spires." (Phillips, 2006, p.127)

Although Lean decided to focus on the urban setting of the novel and abandoned the contrast between the country and the city, he nevertheless incorporated the principle of contrast and made it the dominant structural element of the film, evoking Dickens's approach.

8. The Principle of Contrast

As every writer, Dickens was also shaped by the period in which he lived and his fiction often articulates the recurrent tropes of Victorian culture. Victorian fiction was an amalgam of very different and diverse conventions, where picaresque elements stood alongside melodrama and the Gothic. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* also includes very diverse literary modes, but the crucial element is the principle of contrast – good versus evil, light versus dark, gentlemen versus criminals, the comic versus the dark and the grotesque, poverty versus affluence. In one of the most famous passages from the book, Dickens himself provides an overview of his literary model: "It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes in as regular alternation as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon" (Dickens, 2008, p.207).

Although Dickens paints a very wide canvas of many different characters and incidents, his novels usually reach definite narrative closure, punishing all the evil characters, with the prospect of a bright future awaiting his benevolent and innocent protagonists. This approach was also followed by Dickens's illustrators where "the melodramatic peak is likely to come in the closing numbers, where last words and last images render poetic justice, predict moral continuity, and arrange characters into scenes of satisfying, stable order" (Stein, 2001, p.177). In the constant battle between good and evil, the dark and the grotesque set against the innocent, justice finally prevails and events are often resolved in fairy-tale fashion. Melodramatic sentimentality reflected the battle of good against evil and Dickens here relies on conventions that were generally of vital importance in Victorian culture. In the preface to the 1841 edition, Dickens says that he wanted "to show, in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last".[12]

[12] Cf. Dickens, C. (2002). "The Author's Introduction to the Third Edition." First printed in 1841. In: *Oliver Twist, or The Parish Boy's Progress*, edited by Philip Horne, pp.456-461.

David Lean managed to faithfully convey all these elements in his screen adaptation. The visually stunning opening scene of the film is counterbalanced by the final scene, where we see Mr. Brownlow's symmetrical white mansion, shot in broad daylight, which serves as a symbol of the victory of good over evil and light over darkness. This is exactly the same strategy that he used in his first adaptation of Dickens, *Great Expectations*, when the brilliant prologue with the wind-swept graveyard is contrasted with the final scene where we see Pip and Estella leave Miss Havisham's doomed house. There is a constant emphasis on dark places and nocturnal settings in Lean's *Oliver Twist*. Almost all the places where Oliver stays throughout the film are enveloped in darkness and Lean plays with a set of binary oppositions: bleak Expressionist moments are contrasted with the film's sentimental ending and the infernal world of shadows is replaced by the brightness of daylight. While the first half of the film has some light and humorous scenes, even reminiscent of the leisurely pace of Hollywood films such as *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1936), the second half is almost completely immersed in darkness, echoing the gloomy and bleak atmosphere of *film noirs*. The superb opening of the film, the meeting on London Bridge, the scene of Nancy's brutal murder by Sikes and its thrilling aftermath and ensuing manhunt, are all excellent examples of Lean's visual storytelling.

9. Reflecting Contemporary Concerns

It has already been mentioned that Dickens's novels were shaped by the familiar conventions of the Victorian period. In similar fashion, Lean's adaptation can also be fruitfully analysed by taking contemporary events and concerns into account. Both of his adaptations of Dickens were gloomy and dark enough for a period when the world had just endured the bloodiest war in history. This may be one of the reasons why Lean decided to end his *Oliver Twist* on a lighter note, both echoing Dickens's melodramatic sentimentality and reflecting the contemporary need for uplifting and optimistic closure. The postwar period in Britain was also characterized by the efforts of the emerging welfare state to distance itself from the horrors and widespread poverty of the Victorian period. Lean managed to portray in his film both the brutal despair of the Victorian age and the triumph of the principle of Good. As argued by Williams, Lean's period drama was reflexive of contemporary concerns, especially with "its cross-reference to highly relevant issues of the immediate postwar years such as orphaned children, unmarried motherhood, and commonplace criminality courtesy of the black market" (2014, p.56). Unfortunately, one of these contemporary concerns, the controversy concerning the allegedly anti-Semitic portrait of Fagin in a very sensitive period following the Holocaust, proved disastrous for the wider reception of the film.[13] It is somewhat ironic that the controversy arose over Fagin's character, as his portrait is a very accurate representation of both Dickens's descriptions and Crukshank's illustrations, while Bill Sikes (in both the film and novel), is far more brutal and dangerous. Today, when we are able see the film in its original form decades after it was made, we can only conclude that

[13] There were boycotts both in Berlin and the United States and it was only in 1951 that the film was shown in the United States, yet in a severely cut version, amounting to approximately eleven minutes of film cut, where the majority of the scenes with Fagin were simply deleted.

Lean's second adaptation of Dickens is as equally good as his first, perfectly reflecting the spirit of the original.

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