

Dickens's Victorian Novel versus Lean's Modern Film Adaptation

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Abstract

Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* pinpoints his Victorian literary heritage. On the other hand, David Lean's film adaptation of Dickens' novel conveys it realistically in a period of post War II cinematic modernization.

In the present paper, different points are discussed and presented; First, different critical opinions, by earlier and modern critics, as well as David Lean's personal opinion about film adaptation are revealed and discussed. Second, Dickens's eccentric and grotesque Victorian characters that are presented through Lean's visually and thematically rationalized postwar characters. Third, Dickens's extraordinary characters are contrasted with Lean's realistic ones. Moreover, Lean's modernistic touches to the Dickensian novel which cater the postwar audience's need (for which reason Lean's film is a completely intellectual one and not at all Dickensian) are also unveiled.

Thus, trying to put some hope in the hopeless hearts of his audience in the aftermath of the Second World War, Lean's modernization of the Dickensian era to fit in the world of his contemporary audience is proven.

Key words: *Dickens, Lean, postwar, Victorian, grotesque, modern, adaptation, audience, modernization, difference.*

Introduction

Although Dickens's Victorian novel *Great Expectations* reveals many instances of grotesque exaggerations and juxtapositions, creating a world that resembles the Victorian society he belonged to, David Lean's film stigmatizes it authentically.

Lean, a postwar cinema director, realistically modernizes Dickens's novel written in 1861, into a film in 1946 catering the needs of his post war audience. Since narrative fiction was the dominant mode for early cinema adaptations, literary forms such as novels and plays had their origins in cinematic fictions. However, opinions clash among different critics as for the fidelity to the original literary form in film adaptations. The difference in ideas lies mainly between the earlier and modern critics who had clashing opinions about film adaptations.

***Great Expectations* Adopted and Modernized by David Lean**

Earlier cinema critics, such as Virginia Wolf, considered film adaptations as “inferior forms of art, presented to savage people” (Popova 2013). For the earlier writers, film adaptation being a new form of art, was negatively criticized along with its followers. Thus, it was considered inferior, and its audience was called savage people. Others gave credit to “fidelity” to the original icon; Graham Smith, being one of those, believed that adapted films should have fidelity to their original stories which are in the novels; and contrary to other critics he believed that “Lean’s adaptation is faithful to the spirit of the original” (Smith 2017:61). So, Graham had accepted the idea of adaptation, but with insistence on fidelity to the original icon. Moreover, the process of adaptation, as Peter Reynolds observes, “de-centers the original author and makes the attribution of authorial responsibility problematic” (Reynolds 1993:8). Thus, in a film, the center of the story is not the original author anymore, instead, there are: the actor, the film maker, the director, and the producer, etc....; the author of the adopted novel doesn’t have any authority when the novel is transformed to a film. The novelist doesn’t exist anymore and there are other people who take his place. Thus, it is obvious that all three earlier film adaptation critics, Wolf, Smith, and Reynolds had given credit to novels rather than to films, since according to them films are for savage people, they are supposed to have fidelity to the original, and the author stops having authority on his characters as soon as they are on the screen.

On the other hand, **modern film critics'** opinions about film adaptation absolutely differ from the old ones; for example, John Glavin, a modern cinema critic, warns readers against "the idea that fidelity is a mark of good adaptation" (Burke 2006:89), or else he says "what follows will be a source of either frustration or irritation." (Burke 2006:90). So, according to Glavin, the idea of fidelity must change, or else, the adapted work will be frustrating. Another modern critic called Robert Stam says, "Film is after all, commodity for sale in the market that has to make profit for its makers" (Narmore 2000:56). Stam points out that "lapse of time, varying modes of expression and characterization are elements that shape a film which is after all, deeply immersed in material and financial contingencies" (Narmore 2000:56). So, this means that if the film maker doesn't know how to present the given novel into a film, he would not be able to sell it and make money; consequently, this gives credit to the changes Lean had done to Dickens's *Great Expectations*. According to a third critic, David Lodge (Lodge 1993:200), "the adapter has to perform fundamental tasks like condensation – cutting out superfluous material, accelerating the tempo of events and dramatization, translating narration and represented thought into speech, action, and image." Thus, cutting and adding, the filmmaker has the special task of creating something that is his own and not the author's anymore. It can be concluded that the modern critics' opinion started to change considerations of film adaptation; it started to give credit and freedom to the filmmaker to do what he wants. Nevertheless, it can be mentioned that the changes David Lean has made in his adapted film for the sake of the modern audience are completely accepted and legalized.

Studying the differences between the classical and the modern concept of what is considered art, basically focusing on novel and its adaptation to a film, it is worth quoting Joseph Conrad's 1897 famous statement of his novelistic intention where he claims that his task is to make his audience hear, to make them feel, and he is trying to achieve this by the powers of the written word, before all, helping his audience **to see** (Conrad 1945:5). Sixteen years after Conrad's claim, D.W. Griffith claimed, "The task I am

trying to achieve is above all **to make you see**" (Lewis 1939:119). So, according to these two people, pushed by their own beliefs concerning the writer and the film-maker, their views of a work of art confirm that what concerns adaptation of a novel to be converted to a film, each artist, depending on his profession, whether a writer or a movie maker, is a con or a pro to either art.

Moreover, in an article written to the "Guardian," a **post-modern opinion** about film adaptation is revealed by the well-known British novelist and journalist Will Self who believes that the difference between the old culture and the modern one is obvious. He says, "Literary fiction used to be central to the culture. No more: in the digital age, not only is the physical book in decline, but the very idea of 'difficult' reading is being challenged" (Self 2014). So, what is obvious here is that, in the digital age, people are not even pros to the act of reading, which changes the concept of the whole understanding of the classical canons and gives full credit to the cinema makers instead of novel writers.

Talking of the adaptation process, and Dickens's extraordinary characters being contrasted with Lean's realistic ones; according to Grahame Smith, "adaptation of a literary masterpiece is a dual process, an act of possession followed by recreation in the new medium." (Smith 2017:62). David Lean himself says, "choose what you want to do in the novel and do it proud. If necessary cut characters. Don't keep every character, just take a sniff of each one." (Parker <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/459186/>>).

Thus, choosing and cutting the unnecessary from Dickens's novel Lean invests a film with a sense of reality. However, his version of *Great Expectations* is said to be so "faithful to the spirit of the original that it can be said to convey something of the novel's essence, even to the viewer who has never read the novel" (Smith 2017:61). So, although he has cut some characters and added his own spirit to the film, Lean's version of the film *Great Expectations* of 1946, has accorded almost unanimous praise and remains according to Grahame Smith, the adaptation that is "universally admitted to be a great film" (Smith 2017:60).

Shedding light on what concerns the sense of reality in film adaptation in general, a postwar critic, Irving Pichel notes: “On the surface there may be visual literalness and familiarity. Beyond that, the characters and their actions are made to seem analogous to such actions as the spectators can imagine themselves engaged in . . . in their lives and in the lives of their friends and relatives. This is reality in a limited sense, to be sure. It does not transcend daily life or reveal unseen significances” (Pichel 1947:409).

In connection with what Pichel said about Lean’s adaptation of *Great Expectations*, we recall Dickens’ unusual story and the revelation of eccentric and grotesque Victorian characters such as time-frozen Miss Havisham and Joe, the blacksmith, who are unbelievably lucky and do not develop. The speech and physical appearances of these characters are exaggerated to the point of caricature, so that we do not want to identify ourselves with them. However, Lean presents these characters in such a manner that they appear to be as the real and ordinary people the audience encounters in their ordinary life. Accordingly, considering the ways of adapting characters and creating a film with his own spirit, Pichel says: “Though Dickens wrote of lowly people, he did not see them as ordinary . . . the Dickensian dramatist personae are tasty with the salt of eccentric and their very names are as whimsical as the grotesquerie of their appearance. The England of Dickens may have the architecture and topography of its time, but it is populated with a breed fatter and thinner, baser and nobler, more feeling and less feeling than that happy breed with whom we like to identify ourselves. They range from caricature to idealization . . . They behave with greater love and greater malice than ordinary folk and their lives are filled with the unpredictable and the surprising” (Pichel 1947:409).

Thus, Dickens’s grotesque characters have their lives far different than reality. Considering the plot of *Great Expectations* where an escaped convict gains richness in Australia and out of gratitude converts a young blacksmith to a gentleman along with a time-frozen disappointed bride, Miss Havisham, who grows old in her bridal gown and works out her vengeance raising an innocent young girl heartless, we can see that neither the events, nor the

people we meet in our daily life are like them. Thus, the characters of both Miss Havisham and Magwich – an unbelievably lucky and a good-hearted convict, who happen to be there, only in stories, cannot be given life and appear as real. However, in his 1946 film adaptation, David Lean has succeeded to make the impossible appear to be possible, the unusual appear to be usual and the apparent appear to be actual. So, Dickens's eccentric and grotesque Victorian characters oppose Lean's visually and thematically rationalized postwar characters who look real and authentic.

It is worth mentioning that many critics see these additions rather positive than negative; Imelda Whelehan, for example, says, "to see the film adaptation of a literary text as necessarily lacking some of the force and substance of its original, it might be more fruitful to regard this and subsequent adaptations of a novel in terms of excess rather than lack." Thus, to add on what the novel includes is a virtue and not a vice. Consequently, criticizing the characters and the extent to which these characters appear to be real in Lean's film, Pichel notes: "Mr. Lean has accepted the characters of Dickens and undertaken to rationalize them not psychologically, but visually, and thematically. . . They are realized on the screen by players and a director who concede the possibility of their existence as living persons. Their speech is a credible speech because of the way they utter it. Their actions are credible actions because of the utterly transparent conviction with which they are performed. The extraordinary is embraced as though it were everyday, the unusual as though it were the most usual thing in the world. . . the nature of these unnatural creatures has been so fully grasped, so completely related to the process of actuality, that they come to seem actual... it is not often that a motion picture set in a somewhat remote time and place, occupied by lives far removed from daily commonplace, achieves this kind of immediacy . . . the important thing is that director, writers, and producers have realized fully in screen terms the content of the story as extraordinarily vivid and believable extensions of human experience" (Pichel 1947:410-11).

Thus giving credit to Lean's film, Pitchel reveals how Lean had made the unusual seem to be usual and the extraordinary pictures and characters appear to be usual and believable. Along with what Pitchel says, it is worth mentioning that since Lean's film was a postwar film and the postwar audience needed an escape from the "depression-ridden", classical and old-fashioned Griffith or any other Dickensian film character, it seems that Lean's presentation has taken the postwar audience into consideration. Lean's contemporaries were in need of a change and of modern touches and so was Lean's film. A modern Lean critic says, "Lean's adaptations were full of modernistic touches which would have been almost unimaginable a few years earlier" (Gardiner 2001:234). Other critics claimed that the film is "perplexingly cold and intellectual, not at all the Dickens they were used to" (Gardiner 2001:235).

Having all these critical ideas and claims in mind, I believe that the changes Lean had made to create his film had turned it into a much better adaptation rather than considering his presentation to be purely Dickensian, Victorian, or grotesque.

Talking of Dickensian adaptation style, a Victorian critic, Philip Allingham, criticizing Lean's manner of engaging the sympathies of the audience in the opening scene of his film says: "The first few minutes of the film, the pan along the shore with what looks like a series of gallows on the waterfront, are nowhere in the book, but the image is so strong that it forces us to enter Dickens's and Lean's world and never leave it until the film is over.

The next scene in which Pip is at his parents' grave and encounters Magwitch, invokes strong reactions from the audience. When Magwitch grabs Pip, the theatre audience literally gasps. The theater-goers feel the same fear as Pip... Here is the spirit, the drama, the emotion of Dickens on the screen" (Allingham 1917-1988).

Thus, it is clear that, sometimes, Lean's modern film adaptation is so very different from the Dickensian presentation. For instance, at the beginning of the film Lean presents cows talking to frightened Pip. Although this might

have confused the audience, yet, Lean defends himself pointing out “we were not aiming at reality. What we wanted to create all the time was the world as it seemed to Pip when his imagination was distorted with fear. That, after all, was what Dickens himself did” (Gardiner 2001:235). Defending his modernistic touches to the Dickensian novel Lean has many of his contemporaries believe in his work and appreciate his adaptations. Grahame Smith, a major critic of Dickens, considers the latter to be a genius, who could have invested in words, and this is exactly the reason why what is seen in the film adaptation of the novel may not always seem to sound Dickensian. Thus, Smith says: “Dickens was a writer of genius and naturally his stock in trade is word. This is the first and totally unbridgeable gap we face when discussing Dickens and film, or Dickens and television. It helps us to account for the fact that what we get on the screen is not Dickens. It may look like Dickens and occasionally it may sound like Dickens, but it isn’t really Dickens at all” (Smith 2013:60).

This contrast between the Dickensian *Great Expectations* and Lean's modernized adaptation is revealed towards the end of the film, particularly in the scene where Pip meets Estella in Satis House and reveals his love to her, and after that they both leave Miss Havisham's house to live together happily ever after. Concerning this happy ending, Philip Allingham says, “Pip rips down the draperies of Satis House to let the light of day upon the mould and decay of Satis House and releases Estella from the possessive spirit of the vengeful Miss Havisham” (Allingham 1917-1988). I believe that this happy ending doesn't sound like Dickens at all. However, I am also sure that through this behavior of the actor Lean is trying to let some light into the dark hearts of the people in the period of the aftermath of the World War II, to give some hope to his hopeless audience in his just prior to Christmas 1946 adaptation, thus trying to promise people a better future. It is for this reason that Samuel Theatres has claimed that Lean's adaptation of *Great Expectations* “embodied a powerful stigmatization of the Victorian at a time of postwar modernization” (Gardiner 2001:235). Since during the postwar period people had suffered more than enough and needed some

positive changes in their negative lives, the Victorian was adopted with positive modernization by Lean.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be noted that Lean's modernization of the Dickensian novel was a pill of hope that fought against the hopelessness of the post war disappointments, where Lean fought hard to change Dickens' stable and unchangeable Victorian canon into a beam of light through the adaptation of a modern film in a world suffering from an unbelievable destruction. I would like to end up with Penny Gay's quote that says, "The process of adaptation, like any reading, demands the recognition of the historical distance between the original text and its new audience. The challenge for filmmakers is to find the visual language and a reading of the original that allows the story to speak to that new audience" (Gay 2003:91). These lines explain it all, since in the adaptation of the classic, Lean never forgets to consider first and foremost, his modern audience. The changes he made to the original icon are not only permitted, but also legalized with the excuse of a better life for the future.

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Sources of Data:

Film	Great Expectations: London 1946
Type & time	35mm, black and white, 118 minutes
Director	David Lean
Production Company	Cineguild Independent Producers
Producer	Ronald Neame
Screen Adaptation	David Lean, Ronald Neame, Anthony Havelock-Allan

From the novel by	Charles Dickens
Cinematography	Guy Green
Cast:	John Mills (Pip); Valerie Hobson (Estella); Bernard Miles (Joe Gargery); Francis L. Sullivan (Mr Jaggers); Finlay Currie (Abel Magwitch) (Jaggers), Martita Hunt (Miss Havisham), Ivor Barnard (Wemmick), Anthony Wager (young Pip), Jean Simmons (young Estella), and Alec Guinne (Herbert).

Դիքենսի վիկտորիանական վեպի և դրա հիման վրա Լինի նկարահանած ժամանակակից ֆիլմի միջև եղած հակասությունները

Հոդվածում քննվում են Դեյվիդ Լինի կողմից Երկրորդ համաշխարհային պատերազմից հետո կինեմատոգրաֆիայի արդիականացման ժամանակաշրջանում Դիքենսի *Մեծ Հույսեր* վեպի հիման վրա նկարահանված ֆիլմի մասին տարբեր քննադատական կարծիքներ, ինչպես նաև հենց իր՝ Դեյվիդ Լինի անձնական տեսակետը:

Ֆիլմում Դիքենսի էքսցենտրիկ և գրոտեսկային վիկտորիանական հերոսներին հակադրելով իրատեսական կերպարներ՝ Լինը նպատակ է հետապնդել հույս արթնացնել Երկրորդ համաշխարհային պատերազմի հետևանքով հուսալքված հանդիսատեսի սրտերում՝ դիքենսյան վեպի նկատմամբ ցուցաբերելով մոդեռնիստական մոտեցում: