Creating Cultural Memories: Roman Polanski’s Oliver Twist


Published in:
*Dickens Quarterly*

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.
ARTICLES
Juliet John: Fagin, The Holocaust and Mass Culture; or Oliver Twist on Screen 204
Gareth Cordery: A Special Relationship: Stiggins in England and America (Part Two) 224
Natalie Cole: Dickens and The Act of Gardening 242

REVIEWS
Gareth Cordery on Valerie Brown Lester: Phiz: The Man Who Drew Dickens 255
Margaret Flanders Darby on Carolyn W. de la Oulton: Literature and Religion In Mid-Victorian England: From Dickens to Eliot 259
Leon Litvack: Creating Cultural Memories: Roman Polanski’s “Oliver Twist” 251
David Paroissien on Richard Kelly: Ed. A Christmas Carol 268

THE THIRTY-SIXTH DICKENS SOCIETY MEETING
AND BUSINESS 270

ANNOUNCEMENTS 272

THE DICKENS CHECKLIST—Elizabeth Bridgham 000

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS 000

Dickens Quarterly is produced for the Dickens Society with assistance from the English Departments of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the College of General Studies, Boston University. Printed in Northampton, Massachusetts by Tiger Press.

DQ

Copyright 2005 by the Dickens Society
David Paroissien, General Editor
Trey Philpotts, Review Editor       Stas Radosh, Production Editor
Elizabeth Bridgham, Bibliographer

Dickens Quarterly is edited by David Paroissien, Emeritus Professor of English, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Articles and Notes for publication and all editorial correspondence, including queries about advertising rates, should be sent to the editorial address supplied below:

Professor David Paroissien
100 Woodstock Road
Oxford OX2 7NE, England
Email address: <paroissien@english.umass.edu>

Contributors: Please follow Walter S. Achtert and Joseph Gibaldi, The MLA Style Manual (1985) and submit two typescript copies to the editorial address above. Typescripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed envelope and the cost of return postage, either in pounds sterling or in International Reply Coupons. Every effort will be made to decide on acceptances as soon as possible.

Reviews: The review pages are edited by Professor Trey Philpotts, Department of English, Arkansas Tech University, Russellville, AR 72801. Book reviews are commissioned and it is unlikely that we will accept unsolicited contributions.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of a specific client, is granted by the Dickens Society, provided that the base fee of U.S. $5.00 per copy, plus U.S. $0.05 per page is paid directly to Copyright Clearance Center, 27 Congress Street, Salem, Massachusetts 01970 USA. For those organizations that have been granted a photocopy license by CCC, a separate system of payment has been arranged. The fee code for all users of the Transactional Reporting Service is 0742-5473/93 $5.00 + $0.05.

The full text of Dickens Quarterly is available electronically through Chadwyck-Healey's Literary Journals Index Full Text (LIFT) and LiteratureOnline (LION) products. Contact or <marketing@chadwyck.com> or Tel. 800-521-0600.
and Criminality.” Here the same novels receive a more extended comparison with Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Oulton shows how Dickens changed more in his religious views than Collins across the span of his novels.

Far from implacably rejecting evangelicalism, Dickens and Collins each established a religious framework that incorporated, simplified, and made more accessible the broad fundamentals of Evangelicalism. Both wanted to make better Christians of their readers, and it is worthwhile to read a detailed argument that they did not reject evangelicalism in the process of doing so. Oulton refutes several common assumptions about the religion of these authors; especially interesting is her evidence that Dickens was not the easy-going liberal many have supposed, but that by *Our Mutual Friend* he had struggled to deliver his characters to the possibility of redemption for sin and eventual salvation. If the scope of this study is perhaps too narrow, that is the price of its concentration. For a broader cultural understanding, Lillian Nayder’s recent *Unequal Partners* (2002) might make a good companion volume. The relationship between Collins and Dickens, both personal and professional, is important, not only to their biographers and the critics of their novels, but also to anyone interested in the densely interwoven intellectual culture of mid-century London. Response to evangelicalism is a significant thread in that culture, and Oulton has done a thorough job of uncovering it.

Colgate University

Margaret Flanders Darby

Creating Cultural Memories: Roman Polanski’s *Oliver Twist.*

In the 1940s David Lean set the twentieth-century standard for atmospheric adaptations of Dickens. First, in 1946, he made *Great Expectations*, starring John Mills (Pip), Alec Guinness in his first cinematic performance (Herbert Pocket), Finlay Currie (Magwitch), and Martita Hunt (Miss Havisham). The memorable opening sequence of young Pip’s meeting Magwitch in the graveyard proved almost unique in satisfying “both literary purists and the mass audience” (Marsh 205).1 Lean followed this with *Oliver Twist* in 1948, which starred Guinness again (Fagin), Robert Newton (Sikes), Kay Walsh (Nancy), Francis L. Sullivan (Mr Bumble), and the eight-year-old John Howard Davies (Oliver). The latter film (highly effective in black and white) was also ominously atmospheric from the start, featuring a wordless opening sequence, in which Oliver’s mother
staggered over the rain-swept moors to give birth on the steps of the
workhouse; it maintains a threatening atmosphere at several key
points, and faithfully includes the vagaries of a complex plot. It
enjoyed reasonable success in the UK: it was nominated for best
picture at the BAFTA awards in 1948, and Lean was nominated for
a Golden Lion award in 1949. All subsequent dramatizations of Oliver
Twist have been measured against Lean’s version, from Carol Reed’s
musical Oliver! (1968) to Renny Rye’s television miniseries (1999),
adapted by Alan Bleasdale.

When director Roman Polanski and screenwriter Ronald Harwood
(who had previously collaborated on The Pianist, 2002) produce
the first large-scale dramatic adaptation of the novel for the cinema
for almost sixty years, it is inevitable that viewers—particularly
expert Dickensians—will compare it to Lean’s film and Frank Lloyd’s
silent version (1922), as well as to Dickens’s text. The question of
how—or whether—to satisfy audience expectations is a complex
one: a filmmaker may trade on the “memory” of the novel, which
derives either from an actual reading, or from a circulated cultural
memory which particularly affects adaptations from canonical texts
(Ellis 3). Many viewers come to see new adaptations with their own
versions of the novel or previous films in their minds: if what they
see recreates the pleasure of their own representations, then expec-
tations are fulfilled, and the film is often judged a success; if they are
not, the film tends to be deemed a failure. Robert Stam notes that
the language of film criticism dealing with adaptation has often been
profoundly moralistic, “awash with terms such as infidelity, betrayal,
deformation, violation, vulgarization and desecration” (54). The process of
transition from page to screen or screen to screen is, then, emotive,
because it involves a massive investment in the desire to repeat a
particular act of consumption, whether of fiction or film. It is
evident that from the outset filmmakers are faced with a monumental
task in attempting to breathe new life into a well-known “classic.”

In Polanski’s case, the impetus was his desire to make a family
film, aimed at a younger audience. He notes:

My ambition is to make the film for my own children. I read bedtime
stories to them every night and I know what enchants them and how
they identify with the characters. In making Oliver Twist it is important
I don’t disappoint them. (FPN 4–5)

To this end, he and Harwood emphasised humor, as well as eccentricity
of character, in the depiction of, for example, Mr. Bumble (Jeremy
Swift), Mr. and Mrs. Sowerberry (Michael Heath and Gillian Hanna),
Mr. Gamfield (Andy Linden), Mr. Fang (Alun Armstrong), and
members of the Board of Guardians (Ian McNiece and others).

The prominence of caricature means that realism was not necessarily a prime consideration for the acting; but Polanski recreated London Bridge, Pentonville, and Jacob’s Island in vivid, detailed fashion: for these scenes an enormous set consisting of five major streets, several market squares and a number of side streets was constructed, over three and a half months, on the back lot of Prague’s Barrandov studio. The layout of the streets was aided by a map of 1835 which gave details of the various establishments. Indeed the degree to which Polanski strived for authenticity went far beyond what the casual viewer can appreciate: for example, the principal thoroughfare, King’s Street, is populated by shops with such names as Paxton and Whitefield (cheese makers), Berry Bros. and Rudd (wine merchants), James Lobb (bootmakers), and J. Floris (perfumers)—all of which existed in Dickens’s day, and have modern counterparts. These establishments gave permission for their names to be used, and even offered production designer Allan Starski period pieces from their archives. Such care and attention clearly paid off: the exterior scenes are faithfully rendered, if overly bright and clean—particularly the cobblestones. There is the occasional pile of horse dung evident; but the streets, even in Jacob’s Island, have an overly sanitized look, as if proclaiming their admirability, even though Gustave Doré’s darkly enchanting engravings for London: A Pilgrimage (upon which the film’s credits are superimposed) were an acknowledged influence. The interiors are, however, more convincing. Fagin’s lair is set in the attic of a dilapidated mansion, with plaster falling from the elaborate moldings and architraves; here the mise-en-scène exudes an air of past grandeur and even the presence of ghosts. The workhouse feels and looked like a factory, thus giving a mechanistic feel to parish relief. The place where Sikes and Nancy live is claustrophobically small and sparsely furnished; it complements the idea that Nancy (whose possessions occupy a small corner) harbors a secret concerning her confession to Brownlow about Oliver’s whereabouts, and has nowhere to hide.

The film is an interesting amalgam of levity and somberness, with the alternating rhythms effectively maintained by the excellent British cast. The well-established character actor Edward Hardwicke (best known for playing Dr. Watson opposite Jeremy Brett in various made-for-TV Sherlock Holmes films) gives a sympathetic portrayal of Mr. Brownlow. Leanne Rowe (Nancy) is relatively unknown: as a child she played Helen Burns in Zeffirelli’s Jane Eyre (1996). She offers a highly credible portrayal, through her speech (Cockney but not forced), and also through the various personae she develops for interacting with other characters: she is demure and respectful when
meeting Brownlow; assertive and mildly alluring when plying her trade or in the pub; and agitated but loyal when in the company of Sikes. Her changes of mood are usefully reflected by her change of dress: she wears green, brown, and, for her work as a prostitute, red. Her risking her life to save Oliver is credible, and her off-screen death excites sympathy. Harry Eden (the Artful Dodger) had previously played the part of Paul in Giles MacKinnon’s Pure (2002). He was inspired to become an actor when he saw the musical Oliver! and was struck by the antics of Jack Wild as the Dodger. Eden does not emulate his predecessor’s mischievousness and is consequently less captivating. Yet he is very good with his hands: Polanski had him train with a professional magician, who taught the boy sleight-of-hand and card tricks. Eden says, “Roman said the pick pocketing scenes should feel like a dance because [the boys] do it so perfectly” (FPN 47). Like the choreography in the musical number “You’ve got to pick a pocket or two” the scenes in which the boys ply their trade allow Eden, Lewis Chase (Charley Bates) and others to demonstrate how manual dexterity can be beautifully rendered.

Barney Clark (Oliver) is another newcomer. He played Zak Farmer in the four-part ITV court drama The Brief (2004), but was turned down for a part in Mira Nair’s Vanity Fair (2004) because he was considered too “sweet” to play Rawdy Crawley. His portrayal of Oliver is sincere and somewhat rougher than that of his predecessor John Howard Davies; but he is hampered by the plot, which has been considerably simplified—presumably for the sake of Polanski’s intended younger audience. Certain characters who are essential to Dickens’s original are either absent or have their roles severely curtailed. Mr Bumble and Noah Claypole are abandoned early on; also, there is no hint of Old Sally, Mrs. Corney, Monks, or Rose Maylie, thus the question of Oliver’s origins is never addressed. There is a moment where a viewer might think that this central issue will surface later in the film. As Oliver treks along the country road on his way to London, he calls in on an old woman (played by Liz Smith, “Nana” in The Royle Family); as she observes the boy eating, she remarks that though her eyesight is poor, she recognizes something in Oliver; this promising lead is not, however, pursued, and the issue of Oliver’s birth is killed off.

There are moments of high drama, facilitated by the solid performance of Jamie Forman as Bill Sikes; he has appeared in TV police dramas such as The Bill, as well as in the violent crime thrillers Layer Cake (2004) and I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead (2003). He was an avid reader of Dickens as a child, and is mindful of the performances of his predecessors Robert Newton and Oliver Reed; he thinks of Sikes as a “killer shark” with “a lack of anything going on behind the
eyes”; yet he is aware that “there’s a man in there trying to keep his life together, keep on the move, and keep safe” (FPN 38—9). Thus his survival instinct is apparent throughout. Forman is aware of Sikes’s attractiveness to women and of his role as Nancy’s protector; but the growing tension between them is eerily palpable. This reaches its height when he feels betrayed, though a graphic depiction of Nancy’s murder—one of the great emotional climaxes in all of Dickens—is avoided: viewers only see a spurt of blood on the table. Unfortunately the stagings of Sikes’s mishaps are unconvincing: his fall into the river after the robbery is clumsy, and his inadvertent hanging is ineptly handled.

Pride of place in the drama must be reserved for its finest actor: Sir Ben Kingsley, who plays Fagin. He put a great deal of thought into the part, and into the intellectual connection between Polanski and Dickens, believing that if director and novelist met, they could “have a wonderful evening and a great laugh” (FPN 31). Kingsley also understands completely his director’s approach:

It’s a method of telling a story in the way that a child perceives adults—because children look at adults in a different way. If you ask a child to draw somebody they will draw all those features that the person hoped hadn’t been noticed. Dickens had the same pureness. He managed to write people’s monstrous attributes as perceived through a child’s eyes…which is baffled and curious at the same time. So the screen is going to look like that. And unless you have that perception by the director of a Dickens novel, it won’t work. (FPN 32)

Fagin is the perfect vehicle for such a portrayal. While Dickens directs the reader’s attention and moral perspective in the novel (Fagin as the “devil” with a “great-coat on”), Polanski concentrates on how Oliver sees Kingsley’s character, which the actor himself created in an intuitive fashion. Kingsley dipped into the novel, but (more importantly) developed a deep understanding of nineteenth-century English culture and history, and added personal touches:

I have some very fond childhood memories in Manchester of a man who ran a junkshop with mountains of umbrellas and pots and pans. And I remember looking at him when I was Oliver’s age and being fascinated by this man who wore a coat tied together with string—and my Fagin wears a coat tied together with string. (FPN 33)

The tenderly human portrayal, then, is a mosaic, composed of bits of observation, intimate period knowledge, and immense experience as an actor, including playing Squeers in the Royal Shakespeare
Company's eight-hour production of Nicholas Nickleby (1980).

In this production Fagin is not menacing, but rather captivating, and imbued with a subtle depth that is readily apparent. There are many scenes in which the head shots with Oliver confirm that their relationship is the film's central idea. Though he is a caricature, his speech and actions are never as falsely embellished as Alec Guinness's. He is able to display humanity, and it is in Fagin's mouth that Polanski places one of the film's central moral lessons. As he sits in the condemned cell in Newgate (thus recalling Cruikshank's chilling illustration) Fagin says "You know what I consider the greatest sin in the world, my dear? Ingratitude." Throughout the film Oliver learns about responsibility towards others and the nature of suffering, either through his own experience, or through that of others like Fagin, who seems to have known decency and kindness in his former life. It is clear, given Polanski's own family background (father deported to Mauthausen, mother to Auschwitz) and the direction of his own recent filmmaking (particularly the Oscar-winning Pianist, 2002) that the examination of human pain and anguish is an important aspect of his filmmaking. The prominence of this theme would not have been possible without Kingsley's consummate performance.

Key figures involved in the production were intensely aware of the authority commanded by David Lean's film: Barney Clark, Jamie Forman, producers Robert Benmussa and Timothy Burrill, and, of course, Polanski himself. They all wished to move the film into a new direction, and there were significant alterations—particularly in terms of story, which is streamlined to avoid the complications of what screenwriter Harwood called "far-fetched and Victorian" subplots (FPN 56). This director, who has had other spectacular successes, including the thriller Rosemary's Baby (1968), the crime drama Chinatown (1974), and the darkly evocative period piece Tess (1979), has created a film with high drama, many credible, dynamic characters, and meticulous set decoration. It may not satisfy a shared cultural memory about previous filmic adaptations or an immutably classic novel, nor does it live up to Polanski's expectation of being "THE film, THE OLIVER TWIST" (FPN 49); yet this personal vision has the capacity to engender a new cultural memory for the twenty-first century. It will resonate for viewers young and old, and will form an important addition to the Dickensian cinematic canon.

NOTES

1 The film won Academy Awards for best art production, set decoration (black & white), and for best cinematography (black & white). The film was nominated for a
further three Oscars, including best director, best picture, and best screenplay.

2 The depiction of Fagin in Lean’s version proved controversial: accusations of an excessively stereotypical presentation—particularly in light of the then recent events of World War II—delayed the release of the film in the United States until 1951 (with seven minutes of profile shots of Fagin, and other offending scenes, edited out); it is also interesting that the film was banned on initial release in both Israel and Egypt: in the former for being anti-Semitic, and in the latter for portraying Fagin too sympathetically.

3 For further insight into the 1999 miniseries see http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/master-piece/olivertwist/

4 Comments about the production history of Polanski’s Oliver Twist are taken from the final production notes, which were provided to the media and to the Charles Dickens Museum by Greenroom Digital and Pathé films in September 2005; quotations will be cited as ‘FPN’, accompanied by the relevant page number.

WORKS CITED


Queen’s University, Belfast

Leon Litvack