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7

The impurity of art

the very subject of adaptation has constituted one of the most jejune areas of scholarly writing about the cinema.[1]

This book tells a story about Dickens's relationship to cinema and, like all stories, attempts to fuse together interesting subject matter with a convincing narrative structure. Chapter 1 opens up a dream landscape in which links are made between Dickens and a form which still did not exist at his death. There follows an account of the human fascination with visuality and a descriptive analysis of the scientific devices, toys and popular entertainments which resulted from this preoccupation. Chapter 3 clears the ground theoretically for the whole enterprise, ending with the assertion that the chapters which follow constitute the heart of my claims for Dickens's relationship to film: London and Paris, the panorama and the railway, theatre and spectacle are all analysed as cultural formations which feed into his work, making specific contributions to the proto-cinematic elements in Dickens's writing which lie at the core of the book's argument. Chapter 8 will examine *Little Dorrit* as a case study of a major attempt to transform a novel into film. The final chapter will demonstrate how the conflux of forces discussed in Chapters 4–6 enters into the detail of Dickens's language, above all into the *movement* of his prose and the panoramic nature of his fictional structures. The Epilogue will re-enter the dream landscape of Chapter 1 in bringing together Dickens and his ideal filmic collaborator.

Given the nature of the story I am attempting to tell, the reader will hardly feel surprise that adaptation is not at the forefront of it; on the other hand, it would be quixotic to dismiss the issue from consideration completely. Rather than survey the huge number of films and television plays based on Dickens's work,[2] the present chapter will focus on some of the central issues in adaptation which are also relevant to my general argument, the discussion being restricted to relatively few examples. In making this attempt, and in formulating the book as a whole, I am clearly indebted to the work of some major twentieth-century thinkers. Walter Benjamin provides the essential theoretical underpinning of the whole argument, with his concept of the epoch dreaming the period that is to follow, and he is also a constant recourse for aphorisms, insights and examples. Less in evidence, but almost as important, are Sergei Eisenstein and, for this chapter, André Bazin. Eisenstein has still not been fully assimilated into mainstream thinking or academic scholarship in literary studies, despite the major edition of his writings currently being published by the British Film Institute.[3] Within literary and specifically Dickens studies Eisenstein is mentioned, when at all, in relation to issues of filmic adaptation, but there is little recognition of the fact that his analysis of *Oliver Twist* in the seminal essay 'Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today'[4] is one of the most brilliant pieces of purely literary criticism written on that novel, although constantly inflected by his sense of the proto-filmic aspects of *Oliver Twist*, and of Dickens's work in general.

Turning to Bazin, there is a sense in which, as with Eisenstein, the sheer originality of his thought seems to have inhibited its full recognition; indeed, there was some danger of its being overlooked in recent years, even in film studies, and so a debt is owed to James Naremore for bringing it back into active circulation.[5] Bazin has the potential to be a powerfully liberating force with regard to adaptation, a field of study which is hardly one of the more bracing areas of criticism or scholarship, as the epigraph to this chapter indicates. As Naremore points out,[6] the proliferation of work in this field may have as much to do with the frequency with which film is studied in university literature departments as with the intrinsic intellectual richness of the topic itself. One of the more persuasive recent accounts is provided by Brian MacFarlane who makes a distinction between 'those elements of the original novel which are transferable because not tied to one or other semiotic system – that is, essentially, *narrative*' and those 'which involve intricate processes of adaptation because their effects are closely tied to the semiotic system in which they are manifested – that is, *enunciation*'. He goes on to explain that by 'enunciation, I mean the whole expressive apparatus that governs the presentation – and reception – of the narrative'.[7] These are subtle distinctions, but they still leave us struggling with the old problem of two kinds of novelistic material that present adapters with radically different choices. The necessity of such distinctions is challenged by what might be called Bazin's inspired common sense in dissolving the differences between artistic forms. Writing as early as 1948, he claims that we are 'moving towards a reign of adaptation in which the notion of the unity of the work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed. If the film that was made of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1940; directed by Lewis Milestone) had been successful ... the (literary?) critic of the year 2050 would find not a novel out of which a play and a film had been "made," but rather a single work reflected through three art forms, an artistic pyramid with three sides, all equal in the eyes of the critic'.[8] Bazin is not merely anticipating one of the great coups of literary theory here, the death of the author, he is also proposing a way through all the endless difficulties that adaptation theory seems determined to make for itself. In doing so, he adds weight to one of my own governing ideas, that the appearance of cinema makes possible a proto-filmic reading of Dickens's novels. In Bazin's view we 'are witnessing the making of films that dare to take their inspiration from a novel-like style one might describe as ultracinematographic'.[9] Ultracinematographic is another way of expressing my point, that the advent of cinema enables us to see what is filmic in the language and structure of, say, *Our Mutual Friend*. Writing of Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* on its appearance in 1950, Bazin suggests that the novel on which a film is based may be 'affirmed by the film and not dissolved into it. It is hardly enough to say of this work ... that it is in essence faithful to the original because ... it *is* the novel ... The aesthetic pleasure we derive from Bresson's film ... includes all that the novel has to offer plus ... its refraction in the cinema'.[10]

We cannot, unfortunately, test Bazin's statement against the existence of a film of *Our Mutual Friend* made by an artist of the stature of Bresson but, as I have argued earlier, the novel waits, shimmering with the full range of cinematic possibilities, needing only the creative engagement of a different kind of artist to make it spring into *another* form of life. I stress another because it already does exist in its fullest possible completion *as a novel*. If we cannot discover an example in Dickens, however, verification might be found in an example which appears fairly unlikely, Ian Softley's version of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* of 1997.[11] The novel belongs to James's late phase, one of a group of works characterised by their moral, psychological and social complexity, qualities embodied in a prose style that is remarkably complicated, filled with qualifications and ambiguities that tease the reader towards a resolution that is the reverse of a closed ending. Nothing, it seems, could be more *written*, but Softley and his adapter, Hossein Amini, continually find ways of rendering the original in filmic terms which mirror the novel's seemingly infinite gradations of sympathy, revulsion, commitment and withdrawal. Camera movement, lighting, colour and, above all, performance and setting fuse to create a *Wings of the Dove* in which the novel is not lost but is, rather, enhanced by existing in another universe than the one for which it was originally formed. In other words, for those who have read the book and seen the film, the world is a more interesting and beautiful place, one in which our minds can play over a new *Wings of the Dove* as it were, a fusion of novel and film, instead of indulging in the tiresome questions associated with adaptation: is the film true to the 'spirit' of the novel, is the novel 'better' than the film? And so on. Bazin suggests that we can put these meaningless distinctions to one side in recognising that out of the relationship of both forms a new kind of beauty is born.

Such a dissolution of the boundaries between artistic forms is for Bazin a widespread social and cultural phenomenon, one which reinforces the major concept of Benjamin's famous essay, 'The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.[12] Bazin uses photography and engraving as examples of the fact that 'the adaptation and summary of original works of art have become so customary and so frequent that it would be next to impossible to question their existence today'.[13] What Bazin's thinking provides for those who venture into the field of adaptation is freedom from the cul-de-sac of fidelity to the original, although this by no means involves the disappearance of value judgements. If film-makers have enough 'visual imagination' then 'faithfulness to a form, literary or otherwise, is illusory: what matters is the *equivalence in meaning of the forms*'.[14] With equivalence in meaning as a criterion of judgement, discriminations become possible freed from the tyranny of a fidelity which is at once mechanically reductive and frustratingly intangible. 'But is it Shakespeare?' is a cry that has rolled down the years and 'But is it Dickens?' is equally unhelpful. What, for a start, is Shakespeare, and of course Dickens, questions impossible to answer and which should not be posed in the first place. 'Is there equivalence in meaning of the forms?' is a much better question because it actually admits of some answers, as a brief examination of David Lean's celebrated film of *Great Expectations* (1946) makes clear.

In attempting to deal with this question, ideas developed in other chapters start to bear fruit, the concept of structural imagery from 'Theatre and Spectacle', for example, and the development of Eisenstein's theory of montage or parallel action presented later in the 'Panorama' section of 'Language and Form' (Chapter 9). Of course, any challenge to Lean's *Expectations* elicits surprise since it is a film that has been accorded almost unanimous praise. For the editors of *Screening the Novel*, for example, it is the only adaptation that 'is universally admitted to be a great film'.[15] And there is a great deal of evidence to support this view, from critics of all periods. For Zambrano, for example, '*Great Expectations* fulfils Edward Fischer's basic requirement for a great motion picture – the novel is presented so visually that it would remain a powerful, coherent work without the narrative, but the narrative could not successfully survive without the dramatic visual technique Dickens masters'.[16] Much more recently, Brian MacFarlane states that the film possesses 'a visual stylistic verve that may be compared to the novel's peculiar rhetorical powers'.[17] However, neither of these responses really engages with Bazin's equivalence of forms, relying rather on a somewhat generalised sense of the visual in both novel and film. It is undoubtedly this near unanimity that permits *Screening the Novel*'s editors to claim that 'wherever you look you will find this film acclaimed'.[18] Unfortunately they didn't look as far as Graham Petrie's mordantly brilliant piece, 'Dickens, Godard and the Film Today', published in 1975.[19] Petrie's essay is essential reading in this field, especially his central point that Lean separates out the realistic and poetic elements of the text, frequently dispensing with the poetic, whereas in the novel they co-exist, often simultaneously; from a Benjaminian standpoint that was touched on earlier, the novel is porous. For example, in his guise as commuter and do-it-yourself-er Wemmick is a highly realistic figure who relates directly to Dickens's understanding of important social changes in Victorian society, but his actual embodiment in the novel is full of heightened comic exaggeration, as in his Castle's state of near collapse every time the Stinger, its nightly gun, is set off. This dimension of comic fantasy is, of course, just as pregnant with meaning as the more realistic moments, showing us how precarious Wemmick's attempted retreat from the world really is. Equivalence of forms demands that both aspects of the character and his presentation be honoured, but the film falls back on caricature in an evasion of this complexity. What this amounts to is the charge that Lean and his collaborators simply do not understand the book they are attempting to adapt deeply enough, and the same point can be made in

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relation to my criteria of structural imagery and parallel action. By stripping the novel to the bare bones of its linear narrative the film loses almost all possibility of density of effect and thematic complexity. The removal of Dolge Orlick, to take only one omission, destroys the darker side of Pip's character which is reinforced by Orlick in his role as double. Similarly, Pip's journey to London dilutes the text's sombre resonances through its concentration on the quaintly picturesque. The obtrusive use of a post-horn just as the coach is commencing its journey strikes a reassuring note of Merrie England, which is reinforced by images of London at a complete remove from the crime-stained metropolis of Dickens's imagination. The film contains many local successes, some of which enhance one's understanding of the book, the comic contrast between the vulgarity of Pip's new clothes and the gentlemanly restraint of Herbert's attire, for example. And its opening, Pip's first encounter with Magwitch, is justly praised as one of the best in the history of cinema. On the other hand, a major thematic centre of the novel is Pip's ownership by Magwitch, not merely at the personal level but as part of Dickens's understanding of class relationships in Victorian Britain. This is a profound insight and any adaptation that fails to grasp it, or is unable to enact it filmically, is doomed to ultimate failure, however lively it may be visually.

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The objection to Lean's omission of material from the novel is not an objection in principle, of course, a fact demonstrated by the more or less complete success of his *Oliver Twist* (1948), my personal candidate for the most successful film adaptation of a Dickens novel so far attempted. Its excision of the Rose Maylie aspect of the text involves no loss of equivalence of meaning between the forms. It might, indeed, be regarded as an enhancement of our total imaginative experience of the film and novel co-existing in our mental world since for many Rose represents an indulgence in escapist sentimentality on the part of a still inexperienced writer. Without it, the film achieves something of the fierce irony and savage comedy which characterise the novel's brilliant opening before it is somewhat dissipated by the uninteresting subplot involving Rose, her aunt, and her lover.

My discussion of Christine Edzard's attempt on *Little Dorrit* will point to her apparent unawareness of Eisenstein's essay, and the damaging effects of this on her film. Conversely, the dark-hued tone and stylistic brilliance of Lean's *Oliver* suggest a striking similarity between essay and film, although the date of its first appearance in English makes its impossible that Lean should have read it. Despite this, and in the spirit of Bazin's mixture of forms, it becomes possible to create a complex relationship between Dickens's novel, Eisenstein's proto-cinematic version of it, the films of D. W. Griffith, and Lean's film of *Oliver Twist!* This exercise in cross-fertilisation might begin with Eisenstein's commandeering of Chapter 21 of Dickens's text, the episode beginning 'It was a cheerless morning when they got into the street; blowing and raining hard; and the clouds looking dull and stormy' and which focuses, from a narrative point of view, on Sikes taking an unwilling Oliver on an 'expedition' to rob the Maylie country house, although much more than a plot point is achieved in the process. Eisenstein reproduces the chapter's first two pages, explaining that for 'demonstration purposes I have broken this beginning of the chapter into smaller pieces than did its author; the numbering is, of course, also mine'.[20] In the process he creates a new text, the effect of which can be indicated by a small example:

4. It was market morning.
The ground was covered, nearly ankle-deep, with filth and mire; and
a thick steam, perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle,
and mingling with fog,
which seemed to rest upon the chimney tops, hung heavily above ...
Countrymen,
butchers,
drovers,
hawkers,
boys,
thieves,
idlers,
and vagabonds of every low grade,
were mingled together in a dense mass.[21]

What follows is Eisenstein's evocation of the effect of the whole passage: 'This austere accumulation and quickening tempo, this gradual play of light ... this calculated transition from purely visual elements to an interweaving of them with aural elements ... these magnificently typical details, the reeking bodies of the cattle, from which the steam rises and mingles with the over-all cloud of morning fog'. Eisenstein's observations read like Chesterton (of whom he was a great admirer) at his best, a superbly impressionistic account of the passage leading to the unassailable assertion that the whole thing 'gives the fullest cinematic sensation of the panorama of a market'. The reader will need no reminding at this point that the panorama plays a special role in my argument as perhaps the major example of Victorian spectacular entertainments, one with which Dickens was deeply familiar and which feeds into his work at many levels, above all as a crucial influence in forming the vast structures of his later novels.

Eisenstein goes on to make the crucial connection between the panorama and the city in claiming that Dickens 'was the first to bring factories, machines and railways into literature'[22] and then follows up the observation with the link central to all literary criticism worthy of the name: 'But indication of this "urbanism" in Dickens may be found not only in his thematic material, but also in that head-spinning tempo of changing impressions with which Dickens sketches the city in the form of a dynamic (montage) picture'.[23] This is first-rate criticism, illuminating Dickens's prose and his wider purposes with fresh insights but, as the last words show, it is a criticism suffused with awareness of where Dickens stands in relation to film. His quotation from the novel finishes with 'the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confused the senses' and the question immediately following it is: 'How often have we encountered just such a structure in the work of Griffith?' A lively passage from *Nicholas Nickleby* provokes: 'Isn't this an anticipation of a "symphony of a big city"?' (A reference to *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City*, directed by Ruttmann and Freund in 1927.) A brief quotation from *Hard Times* leads to another surprising juxtaposition: 'Is this Dickens's Coketown of 1853, or King Vidor's *The Crowd* of 1928?'

Eisenstein then moves on to the analysis of an extended passage from *Oliver Twist*, the section where Oliver is entrusted with money by Mr Brownlow and falls back into the clutches of Fagin and the gang. The layout of the chapter as an example of montage, of moving between two lines of parallel action, is too long to be reproduced here, but the cinematic conclusions drawn from it must not be overlooked, as in this splendidly acute observation: 'These scenes are unrolled absolutely à la Griffith: both in their inner emotional line, as well as in the unusual sculptural relief and delineation of the characters; in the uncommon full-bloodedness of the dramatic as well as the humorous traits in them; finally, also in the typical Griffith-esque montage of parallel interlocking of all the links of the separate episodes'.[24] The well-known story of Griffith's indebtedness to Dickens is sufficiently germane to the argument of the book as a whole to demand inclusion at this point. In making the connection, Eisenstein proposes a series of steps in cultural history whose detail was teased out only later by film and theatre historians. In brief, he sees Dickens as drawing from, and contributing to, stage melodrama which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, crossed the Atlantic and 'attained on American soil by the end of the nineteenth century its most complete and exuberant ripeness'.[25] Griffith was nurtured in this artistic milieu before turning to cinema and so Dickens can be seen as a crucial factor in the moral atmosphere of his work. But at the aesthetic level the connection is even more direct, Griffith acknowledging Dickens not merely as a favourite author, but as the originator of one of his most striking cinematic techniques, parallel montage. This is the narrative device, made famous by *Intolerance*, whereby various lines of action are carried forward together, with easy transitions from one to the other despite their wide disparity in historical place and time and which Eisenstein sees as having its origins in Dickens, in the story of Oliver's recapture by Nancy, for example, which alternates with scenes in which Mr Brownlow and his friend, Grimwig, await the boy's return from his expedition to the bookseller, equipped with his new clothes, valuable books and a five pound note. The technique is clearly revealed at the end of Chapter 15 which moves from Oliver being 'dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts' into 'The gas-lamps were lighted; Mrs Bedwin was waiting anxiously at the open door; the servant had run up the street twenty times to see if there were any traces of Oliver; and still the two old gentlemen sat, perseveringly, in the dark parlour, with the watch between them'.

One final example of Eisenstein's insight demands attention, his analysis of the curious little digression at the beginning of Chapter 17 of *Oliver Twist*, which states that 'in all good murderous melodramas' it is customary to 'present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon'. This custom leads to one of the best-known features of melodrama, its abrupt transitions from one emotional register to another. As the passage acknowledges, 'such changes appear absurd; but they are not so unnatural as they would seem at first sight'. The fact is that they occur just as frequently in reality itself, but in those cases we are actors in the drama of life rather than simply spectators in the theatre. In real life we 'are blind to violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion and feeling, which, presented before the eyes of mere spectators, are at once condemned as outrageous and preposterous'. This thought-provoking observation has been understood in a number of different ways, as evidence of Dickens's theoretical understanding of melodrama and what he himself was up to in using it, for example. But what we are concerned with is Eisenstein's conclusion that: 'It is Dickens's own "treatise" on the principles of this montage construction of the story which he carries out so fascinatingly, and which passed into the style of

Griffith'.[26] And so rather in the manner of Abel Gance, in Chapter 1, forecasting that Shakespeare would make films, Dickens appears here as theorist as well as practitioner, the uncanny creator of filmic shadows waiting to be released into their celluloid form by Griffith and those who came after him.

It is time to bring Lean's *Oliver* into the equation and with it the realisation that there is not merely a more or less complete equivalence in meaning between his film and the novel, but that we seem to be looking at a film which displays an intelligent grasp of the principles set out in Eisenstein's essay. As I have already pointed out, dates of publication as well as other factors make this unlikely, although the similarities may have something to do with Lean's almost certainly having seen, and to some extent, absorbed, Eistenstein's own creative work. Be that as it may, Oliver's first entrance into London in Chapter 7 is a perfect embodiment of the 'panorama of a market' that Eisenstein sees in the novel, a masterful sequence that makes the strongest possible contrast to the bland images of the city presented in the film version of *Great Expectations*. Interestingly, Lean and his collaborators use poetic licence to take the evocation of this moment in *Oliver* from the description of dawn in the streets in Chapter 21, when Oliver is being taken by Sikes on the expedition to rob the Maylies. We see Oliver, strained and exhausted, in continual movement and part of an isolating crowd that constantly jostles him, the whole effect gaining its intensity from focusing on him in a medium–close shot so that he appears alone even though he is surrounded by the truncated figures of a mass of people. Here, as throughout the film, the use of sound is exemplary as is the invariably apt musical score. We cut to Oliver in the city on a blast of almost overwhelming noise, including the raucous uproar of a street band, the bleating of sheep heading for market, and the patter of an auctioneer spouting what sounds like gibberish. Everything contributes to Oliver's evidently growing exhaustion, the perfect preparation for the appearance of the Dodger, faultlessly got-up, at his most malign in the close-up of his appraising stare at Oliver, with the looming presence of St Paul's in the background.

St. Paul's
etc

The riches on display in the film are almost limitless. Comedy is never far away but is either suitably grotesque, as in the scenes between Mr Bumble and Mrs Corney, or with a hint of the sinister, even in the superbly choreographed scene of the boys playing at thieves, with Fagin as the innocent bourgeois gentleman. The latter is a moment when we see Oliver's first outburst of happy laughter, and the visual irony at work in the scene is a completely successful transposition of the book's verbal irony. Every aspect of cinematic technique – lighting, especially the use of chiaroscuro, editing and camera movement – operates with maximum effectiveness to create a film which stands as a work of art on a par with its inspiration. Again, unlike Lean's *Great Expectations*, his *Oliver* displays a complete grasp of the city as labyrinth, reproducing its sense of mythic horror and Freudian overtones as well as the more mundane aspects of filth, drunkenness and poverty. Two sequences, both tours de force, illustrate this to perfection. After their first meeting, the Dodger hurries Oliver off to the den with breathtaking speed, around corners, through alleys and up seemingly endless flights of stairs to a dizzying conclusion, their crossing of a precarious looking bridge from the 'normal' world to that of Fagin with, as so often, St Paul's looming over their tiny figures. The spirits of Piranesi and Gustave Doré inhabit the whole sequence, with the city as a moral as well as a physical maze in which the innocent child is hustled not merely into the presence of Fagin but also into that of his own deepest fears. Just as powerful is the bravura sequence when Oliver is taken on his first criminal outing and is mistaken for the perpetrator when the efforts of the Dodger and his accomplice go awry. To cries of 'Stop thief', Oliver hares off, again into a maze of alleys, courts, flights of stairs, the whole breathless movement orchestrated through a combination of editing, tracking shots and deep focus, ending with a fade to black representing the punch he has just run into at breakneck speed. This is 'equivalence of meaning of the forms' with a vengeance because such moments do not merely effect a transposition into another medium of what the novel is about; their stylistic richness mimics one of Dickens's most striking characteristics as a novelist, his love of displaying his total command over all aspects of fictional technique.

It is tempting to run through every scene of this well-nigh perfect film, characterised as it is by compassion as well as technical virtuosity. The scene in which the baby Oliver is carried through the workhouse combines both, the infant in his swaddling clothes forming a poignant contrast to the horrors of his future 'home' which is rendered in a complex set whose visual power can only be fully appreciated in the cinema. Everything that is best in Lean's version might be summed up by the scenes leading to Oliver asking for more. 'You're to be presented to the Board' says a huge Mr Bumble to the tiny scrap and we cut to that body discussing their charges. 'This workhouse has become a regular place of entertainment for the poorer classes' is followed by a jarringly savage cut to a deafeningly loud laundry room where scrawny wretches toil desperately at backbreaking tasks, Oliver and Mr Bumble crossing it in a complex tracking shot. We cut back to the Board's discussion, followed by their information to Oliver that he is to be 'educated', by picking oakum. An imprisoning overhead shot, through the curved spikes of the workhouse gate, captures a line of children crossing the snow-covered yard on their way to virtually prison-like hard labour to the accompaniment of a sinister march tune. Again we cut, with no transition, to the surface of a cauldron of watery gruel, bowls of which the children grasp with pathetic eagerness. There follows one of the film's most striking moments, a scene that could have come out of Eisenstein's *Strike*, but which also belongs perfectly to its own time and so forms a justification for Bazin's co-existence of artistic forms. A group of workhouse children, the boys with shaven heads, all wan with hunger, gaze down through bars at their elders and betters making pigs of themselves over a grotesquely abundant meal. It goes without saying that this is a perfect embodiment of the near-starvation prevalent in Victorian workhouses, but it is also an image that echoes the concentration camps of the Second World War. Beyond all this, the moment has intimations of Goya as well as Eisenstein; in other words, it takes its place in a Western tradition of images of suffering inflicted by human cruelty. Again we cut without transition to the boys drawing lots, a moment that is only explicable in terms of what follows. Oliver is held briefly in pathetic isolation after having drawn the short straw and we cut immediately to a tracking shot down a table as the children eat their skimpy meal to the clang of cutlery on plates. Oliver is again isolated, surrounded by threatening gazes at his unwillingness to act; he embarks on his task in deep focus, a tiny figure approaching a swishing cane. Finally, he makes his request and uproar follows.

What Lean highlights for us here with such skill is the distinction between an adaptation and what might be called a version of one medium in terms of another, an additional way of making the point that the director and his collaborators understood what Dickens was up to in his novel. Their removal of the Rose Maylie episodes constitutes a triumphant justification of Bazin's sense of works of art co-existing in a world of equivalent forms in which pettifogging distinctions can be put to one side in favour of the recognition that '*Oliver Twist*' is now an amalgam of book and film in which both have contributed to our sense of the mixed final product, a conclusion that takes us on to Bazin's concept of a mixed cinema.

Bazin's thought is both challenging and helpful, never more so than in his defence of the essential impurity of art. He takes as his starting point the 'aesthetic history of influence in art in general' which 'would almost certainly reveal ... that at some stage in their evolution there has been a definite commerce between the technique of the various arts. Our prejudice about "pure art" is a critical development of relatively recent origins'.[27] One hopes that Bazin would have been gratified to discover that this is a prejudice that has weakened in recent years under what some would regard as the pressures generated by the moves into post-structuralism and the post-modern. Whatever the explanation, it is certainly not difficult to point to examples of, say, the breakdown in generic classification brought about by such works as Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark*.[28] Gray is, of course, a painter as well as a writer and his book is not so much illustrated as decorated with a constant stream of drawings, typographical games, curlicues of every possible kind. *Lanark* is clearly an art object in which the visual and the written carry more or less equal weight. Again, searching for Iain Sinclair's *Lights Out for the Territory*[29] on the shelves of a bookshop is no easy task since his text is a fantastic amalgam of travelogue, graffiti, tall tales, politics and mysticism, what he himself calls psycho-geography — not a category that one is likely to find listed in a bookshop. The sounds of everyday life taped into the music of Steve Reich, in his *Different Trains* for example, shows how widespread such developments are as does the creation of the film essay in Welles's *F for Fake* which, as early as 1973, anticipated the full panoply of post-modern effects in its self-reflexive playing with time, subjectivity and the creation of the medium itself.

Bazin stands, in fact, midway between the contemporary distrust of the purity of art forms and an earlier manifestation of particular relevance to Dickens. Despite the success of Jane Austen and Walter Scott there was still a debate in the 1830s as to the merits of the novel as a form and whether, indeed, it deserved the description of art, arguments not dissimilar to those that greeted the appearance of film, and which to some extent have still not been resolved, especially in a culture so dominated by the prestige of literature as Britain's. The problem was only exacerbated for the Victorians by Dickens's explosive success in a mode of publication, the monthly serial, which many soberly minded critics and readers regarded with suspicion. Its combination of text, illustrations and advertisements was often presented as essentially ephemeral, more of a magazine or miscellany than anything that could be described as art. Dickens succeeded in imposing himself as artist as well as entertainer on a vast public, but it is noteworthy that he never abandoned the serial as the form in which his work made its first appearance. As I have already pointed out in Chapter 1, Dickens's situation in the culture of his period was further complicated by his addiction to what he himself called working his copyright, so that at any given moment any given work might be appearing before the public in a myriad of manifestations, as a monthly or weekly serial as well as in a number of different formats, single-volume cheap editions alongside more elaborately presented de luxe ones. In addition, Dickens's work was constantly being pirated, with unauthorised texts appearing in the United States, for example. This has led to debate among scholars as to what constitutes the definitive text of any given novel, a situation not entirely dissimilar to that described by Usai in exploding the concept of an original print in cinema. Usai's working out of the complications ensuing from the distribution of two copies of a film, one for America and one for Europe, made in 1914 is too detailed to be reproduced here and so his conclusions will have to suffice: 'Take any Chaplin short, and you will soon realise that the "big bang" of the original camera negative has created a constellation of copies we will never be able to quantify'.[30]

Martin Meisel takes the argument a stage further in relation to Victorian theatre when he notes that 'drama itself was so much a serial pictorial form', one whose pictures were 'chiefly composed of a novel's illustrations "realized"', a phenomenon which reflects the 'imaginative appeal of those particular pictures ... and (more remotely) on how the whole genre of serial illustrated fiction was originally experienced'.[31] If we add to this our knowledge of some of Dickens's favourite amusements, such as Astley's, where plays were performed on horseback and famous battles were celebrated with huge casts of people and animals, we may not be quite so surprised by the extravaganzas put on by Alfred John West whose film shows were known as *Our Navy and Our Army* and 'contained a mixture of film, magic lantern slides, sound effects, musical accompaniment, narration and jingoistic songs sung with great patriotic fervour', shows which 'required up to fifty people to stage'.[32] The point to be made here is that Dickens emerged from, and contributed to, a world in which entertainments were composed of any material that came to hand and seemed relevant, exactly the world out of which film itself made its appearance. And if the visual was a dominating presence in this world, existing across a range of forms, this is equally true of narrative which, for the nineteenth century, was a part of all media, painting as much as theatre and the novel.

There is no reason to feel that Bazin would have been appalled by these populist manifestations; indeed, far from carping at the impure merging of forms, Bazin celebrates it, as we can see in his response to the filming of paintings, an activity almost guaranteed to raise purist hackles: 'Instead of complaining that the cinema cannot give us paintings as they really are, should we not rather marvel that we have at last found an open sesame for the masses to the treasures of the world of art?[33] He continues with his favourite image of a new form created out of existing ones: 'The film of a painting is an aesthetic symbiosis of screen and painting, as is the lichen of the algae and mushroom. To be annoyed by this is as ridiculous as to condemn the opera on behalf of theatre and music'.[34] Such open-mindedness to art and all its possibilities is a far cry from the attitude adopted by the writers of *Screening the Novel*, in their assertion that 'Dickens was a writer of genius and naturally his stock in trade is words. This is the first, and totally unbridgeable, gap we face when discussing Dickens and films, 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'.[35] This is hardly a helpful comment. If the gap between media is 'totally unbridgeable' there seems absolutely no way forward, but since adaptations, or versions, of Dickens exist and continue to be made there must be some way of talking about them sensibly. Yet again, Bazin comes to the rescue with his metaphor of adaptation as a form of translation: 'The best translation is that which demonstrates a close intimacy with the genius of both languages and, likewise, a mastery of both'.[36] As I suggested earlier, David Lean has a mastery of *Oliver Twist* which enables him to translate the language of text into the language of film with brilliant success, although he is on less sure ground with *Great Expectations*.

With characteristic daring, Bazin is not afraid to push the argument into the area of film and theatre, another field where clichés and stereotyped responses abound. Once again, his views are rooted in facts and practicalities, that filmed theatre does actually exist, whether or not it is good, bad or indifferent, as we can see in his reference to 'the practice (certain) ... the theory (possible) of successful filmed theatre'.[37] Bazin takes this further with his characteristic use of paradox; that is, paradox in the service of meaning rather than pyrotechnical display for its own sake: 'The theatre needed the cinema before it could freely express what it had to say ... The function of the cinema is to reveal, to bring to light certain details that the stage would have left untreated'[38] or, one might suggest, is incapable of showing clearly enough. An example from Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996) comes to mind, the moment when Juliet stirs from her drug-induced simulacrum of death at the very second when Romeo, unaware of her return to life, reaches for the knife to kill himself. The film enables us to see this in agonising close-up in a way that is technically impossible in the theatre, and so provides justification for the paradox of a play needing cinema before it can freely express what it has to say.

The expressiveness of artistic forms provides a final instance of the mixed nature of literature and film, a good starting point being provided by Dickens's contemporary, George Henry Lewes, in remarking that 'Dickens once declared to me that every word said by his characters was distinctly *heard* by him'.[39] I, as well as almost every other writer on Dickens, have stressed the visual element in his work, his power of seeing and of making us see. But as Eisenstein points out in his analysis of the panorama of the market depicted in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens hears and creates in his readers the illusion of hearing just as much as he gives the illusion of sight. If, then, Dickens's novels speak as well as show, the paradoxical nature of art is furthered by cinema, the essentially visual medium, in Eisenstein's claim that 'an understanding of montage as not merely a means of producing effects, but above all ... a means of *speaking*, a means of *communicating* ideas, of communicating them by way of film language, by way of a special form of film *speech*'.[40] In other words, both forms talk to us across the range of sensuous possibilities. In the cinema we do, of course, literally see and hear; on the other hand, we cannot smell although there are time-honoured devices for making us aware of both perfumes and evil stenches. In literature, seeing and hearing, and other sense impressions, are at a remove, illusions fostered by our imaginative surrender to powerful language. In Eisenstein's terms both forms speak to us, communicating abstractions as well as concrete particularities, and the explanation is a simple one – once it is pointed out to us by Bazin, in a passage that demands repetition: 'the vast majority of the images on the screen conform to the psychology of the theatre or to the novel of classical analysis. They proceed from the common-sense supposition that a necessary and unambiguous causal relationship exists between feelings and their outward manifestations. They postulate that all is in the consciousness and that this consciousness can be known'.[41] Despite all their obvious differences, then, film and literature share an awareness of consciousness as their essential subject matter, and the technical means for conveying an illusion of consciousness to viewers and readers. It is this which makes adaptation not merely possible but desirable.

Notes

1 Naremore, James (ed.), *Film Adaptation*, London: Athlone Press, 2000, p. 1.
2 I provide a brief survey of the field in my entries on 'films and film-makers of Dickens' and 'television adaptations of Dickens' in Schlicke, Paul (ed.), *Oxford Reader's Guide to Charles Dickens*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 233–6, 548–54.
3 The major editor and translator for this collection of Eisenstein's writings is Richard Taylor; important contributions have also been made by Ian Christie. To be published by British Film Institute.
4 Eisenstein, Sergei, *Film Form: essays in film theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda, London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1977.
5 Naremore, *Adaptation*, p. 1.
6 Naremore, *Adaptation*, p. 1.
7 MacFarlane, Brian, *Novel into Film: an introduction to the theory of adaptation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 20.
8 Bazin, André, 'Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest', in Naremore, *Adaptation*, p. 26.
9 Bazin, André, *What is Cinema? Essays selected and translated by Hugh Gray*, Vol. 1, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967, p. 64.
10 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 143.
11 Another interesting test case is the modern-day version of *Hard Times* (*Tempos Dificeis, Este Tempo*) made by the Portuguese director, Joao Botelho in 1988, but the film is difficult to obtain and is probably unfamiliar, except by name, to many readers.
12 See Benjamin,Walter, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn and ed. Hannah Arendt, Glasgow: Fontana, 1973.
13 Naremore, *Adaptation*, p. 19.
14 Naremore, *Adaptation*, p. 20.
15 Giddings, R., Selby, K. and Wensley, C. (eds.), *Screening the Novel: the theory and practice of literary dramatization*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990, p. 16.
16 Zambrano, A. L., '*Great Expectations*: Dickens and David Lean', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. II, Spring, No. 2, 1974, p. 137.
17 MacFarlane, *Novel into Film*, p. 105.
18 Giddings, *Screening the Novel*, p. 16.
19 Petrie, Graham, 'Dickens, Godard, and the Film Today', *The Yale Review*, Vol. LXIV, No. 2, 1975.
20 Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 214, n.
21 Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 215.
22 The above quotations are all taken from Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 216.
23 Eisenstein, *Film Form*, pp. 216–17.
24 The above quotations are all taken from Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 216–18.
25 Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 226.
26 Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 223.
27 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 116.
28 Alasdair Gray's novel, *Lanark: a life in four books*, is a post-modern masterpiece and was first published in Edinburgh by Canongate Publishing Ltd, 1981.
29 Sinclair Iain, *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 excursions in the secret history of London*, London: Granta Books, 1997.

30 Usai, Paolo Cherchi, *Silent Cinema: an introduction*, London: British Film Institute, 2000, p. 47.
31 Meisel, Martin, *Realizations: narrative, pictorial, and theatrical arts in nineteenth-century England*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 250.
32 Herbert, Stephen, and McKernan, Luke (eds.), *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema: a worldwide survey*, London: British Film Institute, 1996, p. 150.
33 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 167.
34 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 168.
35 Giddings, *Screening the Novel*, p. 15.
36 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 117.
37 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 114.
38 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 91.
39 Lewes, George Henry, 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', in *The Fortnightly Review*, 1 February 1872, p. 149.
40 Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 245.
41 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 62.

Novel into film: the case of *Little Dorrit*

8

Something Wrong Somewhere.[1]

A major cinematic adaptation of one of Dickens's greatest novels is an important enough event to demand a chapter to itself. Literary and film theory, the sociology of artistic production, and the current role of the media in Britain are all brought together in the appearance of Christine Edzard's six-hour version of *Little Dorrit*, filmed in 1987 and divided into two parts: 'Nobody's Fault' and 'Little Dorrit's Story'. We have already seen that the adaptation of Dickens's work into any medium should have long ceased to be a matter of surprise; from almost its first appearance his work was taken over into myriad forms. The immense popular success of *Pickwick* led to instant commercial exploitation in the form of Boz cabs, Weller corduroys, and Pickwick cigars, and the novels were endlessly pirated for the stage, frequently as they were appearing in their serial parts, an impertinence for which their perpetrators were punished by having to work out for themselves how, say, *Nicholas Nickleby* was going to end. As we have seen, such invasions of his creative privacy did occasionally drive Dickens to frenzies of irritation,[2] but his general attitude might best be described as benign indifference. If nothing else, they testified to the breadth of his popular appeal and might well lead customers ignorant of the original to want to read, and therefore perhaps purchase, Dickens's books for themselves.

This stress on the economic makes a satisfying link from Dickens to the commercial and industrial base of feature film-making, an emphasis which the sociology of literary production has helped to make more acceptable than to earlier generations of