
Part I

History and Contexts:
From Image to Sound

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Literary Adaptation in the Silent Era

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When the nascent moving picture industry emerged in the 1890s, its significance in technological, social, and economic terms quickly became apparent. Less clear, however, was the dominant use to which moving pictures should be put. What did they do best? Through what sort of subjects could they most effectively broadcast their technological wizardry, showcase their artistry, and maximize their returns? Was this a medium for recording the world with previously untapped verisimilitude, or a medium in which the fantastical imaginary could be given rein as never before? A vehicle for exploring life as it was, or life as it might be? A medium of description or creation? A mechanism or an art form? Film offered what James Monaco has termed a “neutral template” (2009: 45) to be appropriated differently by producers according to their priorities, interests, and broader thinking about the medium’s strengths and potential. And surveying the uses to which this “neutral template” was put in cinema’s pioneering years (1896–c.1906) reveals no immediate consensus about where the industry thought it should principally channel its energies. This sustained equivocation about what sort of films it should be producing is graphically reflected in the diverse nature both of production company output and of exhibitors’ film programs across this period.

An 1896 Edison catalogue advertising its films to exhibitors, for example, reveals much about the company’s breadth of production. Each film subject that Edison had for sale is, as the catalogue introduction announces, “tabulate[d] and concisely describe[d] . . . in a manner which will enable our patrons to select intelligently from our list, those pictures which are best suited to the tastes of their audiences”

(Herbert et al., 1996: 19). At a cost of £4 for each fifty-foot film subject, the catalogue lists films by genre: “Dances” (stick dances, Sioux Indian dances, Japanese dances, London Gaiety Girl dances, buck dances, and a dancing dog); “Combats” (a Mexican knife duel, a broadsword fight in full armor, a Graeco-Roman wrestling match, female fencers, and a pair of boxing cats); “Military Scenes” (a dress parade, a mess call, a skirmish drill); “Acrobatic Performances” (trapeze acts, head balancing, an Arabian knife tumbler, and a “marvelous lady contortionist”); and “Descriptive Scenes” (a fire rescue scene, a scalping, ‘Chinese Laundry’ scene, Joan of Arc, and two different scenes adapted from David Henderson’s stage burlesque of George du Maurier’s popular 1894 novel *Trilby*). Some exhibitors may have favored one film genre over another in deciding what was “best suited to the tastes of their audiences.” Surviving exhibitors’ programs, however, suggest that what was most frequently valued in exhibition venues of the period was variety.

Let us consider one London film program from 1899 to sample the flavor of a picture-going audience’s viewing experience from the very early days of the industry. The program of “The American Biograph” exhibited at the Palace Theatre of Varieties in London on September 20, 1899 featured shots of Queen Victoria in her carriage inspecting the Honorary Artillery Company, of “Madame Dreyfus Leaving the Prison” (capitalizing on the popularity of the ongoing Dreyfus affair), of the Henley regatta, of a panoramic view of Conway Castle, of the Meadowbrook Hunt, of a sketch entitled “Man Overboard,” and of an international hurdles race at the Queen’s Club. And, on the same program, sandwiched directly between “Polo at Hurlingham” and some actuality footage of American naval hero “Admiral Dewey,” was the first public exhibition of the first Shakespeare film ever made (some brief action recorded from Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s contemporaneous London stage production of Shakespeare’s *King John*).¹ Moreover, as part of a broader program of music-hall acts, the films projected were also jostling for position alongside live variety acts of various sorts (comedians, acrobats, musicians, actors performing brief “scenes,” jugglers). What might a brief encounter with a Shakespearean dramatic fragment on screen such as that on offer here have been expected to achieve in the midst of such varied fare? Or, similarly, how might audiences have responded to the comparably fleeting encounter with a re-textualized work provided by Edison’s scenes from *Trilby* (parodically mediated through Henderson’s stage burlesque), or by American Biograph’s contemporaneous releases dramatizing scenes from the same novel?

Exhibited at a standard projection speed, each of the Edison films from the 1896 catalogue represented approximately a minute’s runtime. The short films on the 1899 London Biograph program would have had a projection time of between one and four minutes. Each film therefore gave merely a sample snapshot, isolated episode or temporal slice of the subject being showcased. It was the task of the accompanying musicians in the exhibition venue to attempt to make sense of the transitions of pace and tone between actualities and brief sketches, the skittish and the serious, that bumped up against each other so percussively on picture programs

of the period. The joy to be had in any one performance, or in any one projected film short from such a program, was, therefore, dependent in no small measure on its contribution to the cumulative variety line-up.

The adaptive life of early cinema was certainly not limited to an exclusive relationship with literary texts. In the fluid intermedial traffic of subjects and ideas that characterized the freewheeling cultural momentum of the period, material and styles from vaudeville skits, music-hall acts, magic lantern shows, topical, satirical and saucy cartoons, works of art, *tableaux vivants*, opera, illustrations, popular songs, and other forms of cultural expression (performed and printed) were variously appropriated, referenced, and re-couched by filmmakers. In the interests of delimitation for this volume, however, it is those films (more than plentiful in themselves) that had a discernible relationship with prior literary and theatrical texts that will absorb my attention. This being the case, what particular value might a film trailing literary and theatrical associations have brought to the giddy and fast-moving *mélange* of other spectating pleasures that made up the early film programs? To consider this question, I return to the 1896 scenes from *Trilby* released by two separate (competitor) American production companies and to the Biograph's *King John* scenes. Firstly, both *Trilby* and *King John* were on offer as the vehicle for heightened dramatic performances – and both featured the hyperbolized drama of a death scene (of Svengali and King John respectively). Secondly, drawing upon the invaluable early cinema commodity of “audience foreknowledge” (Musser, 1990a: 257–9), for some in the audience both films would have triggered a bank of broader familiarity with the novel or play synecdochically summoned by the brief scenes projected. Thirdly, in the person of Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the *King John* film gave international audiences access to one of the “great” Shakespearean actors of the moment as was explicitly acknowledged in the film's altered title for its U.S. release, “Beerbohm Tree, The Great English Actor” (Brown and Anthony, 1999: 228), thereby self-consciously adding cultural ballast to an exhibition program. Fourthly, the Edison *Trilby* scenes, being an 1896 satirical quotation from a recent stage burlesque of an 1894 serialized novel, signaled both the contemporaneity of the new moving picture industry's pool of reference and its will to insert itself directly into the cross-referencing networks of other expressive media, as both commentator upon and contributor to their cultural operations. Fifthly, and relatedly, as the Biograph *Trilby* scenes were played on London programs in 1897 (Buchanan, 2009: 60–1), these would have evoked Herbert Beerbohm Tree's own famously successful London stage adaptation of *Trilby* from the 1895–6 season – a production in which he had himself played a memorably creepy Svengali. Lastly, as played at London's Palace Theatre in autumn 1899, the *King John* short film cannot but have served, in an innovatively transmedial marketing ruse and further indication of the industry's up-to-the-minute topicality, as, in effect, a teaser-trailer for Tree's full-length stage production of *King John* then playing at Her Majesty's Theatre down the road (Buchanan, 2009: 68; McKernan, 2000).

The networks of intermedial reference to, and association with, the world beyond the exhibition hall that these adapted films courted made them some of the most allusively intricate of any of the 1890s films. Tom Gunning's influential argument (1989) that pioneering cinema created "an aesthetic of astonishment" as part of a "cinema of attractions" has now passed into the received wisdom about what early cinema *was*. In the process, Gunning's paradigm has, in the way of things, sometimes been reduced to a cruder and misleading summary of itself in which a stupefied audience for early cinema is posited, watching in awed astonishment as the wondrous moving images unspool before their eyes. Many of the generously allusive signals within early films such as *Trilby* and *King John*, pointing knowingly (and multiply) beyond their own borders, provide an antidote to that critically reductive tendency by reminding us that the "astonishment" provoked by early cinema was not one that deactivated participative discernment or associative thinking, or that equated in any way to stupefaction. From the first, in fact, the moving picture industry offered a product whose viewing pleasures were partly to be found specifically in active and judicious comparison – comparison with the extra-cinematic world of lived experience and, crucially, comparison with other, known cultural works and styles of artistic address.

For all the stimulating associative reach of these films, catalogues and programs from the 1890s and the early years of the twentieth century reveal that titles with literary and/or theatrical connections were far from dominant in terms of industry output and market exposure. Nevertheless, in the fast-moving early cinema period, all production and exhibition conventions were subject to ongoing adjustment as they responded relatively nimbly to evolving market demands. And, as other things in the industry changed (camera and projection technology, film stock, exhibition venues, distribution channels, the commercial relationship of production companies to distributors and exhibitors, the authorial branding of films, ticket pricing, star power, the legislation that governed the industry), so too, through the early years of the twentieth century, was the balance of type of production company output significantly adjusted. Audiences, now accustomed to the wonders of the no-longer-new technology, became less satisfied by films simply celebrating the pure kinetics of graceful, powerful or startling movement, and, alongside this, correspondingly more ambitious in their own viewing tastes and narrative aspirations. In relative market terms, therefore, in a move traceable from c.1903 onwards, the brief actualities, scenic views, sporting snapshots, whirling dancers, and fight films that had dominated early film exhibition, were losing out to cinema's impulse to tell stories (Musser, 1990b: 337–69). And with the enthusiasm for stories came the need for narrative material. Original scripts were not forthcoming fast enough to meet industry needs, nor to provide the tonal variety required to please all corners of the house. Given the dizzying production rate and voracious appetite of the market, where should the industry turn for material? Unsurprisingly, it reached gratefully for the library shelf and from c.1907 onwards, adapting the work of existing authors became one in a range of standard story-telling production practices for most of the

leading film companies. In his published catalogue of *Books and Plays in Film, 1896–1915*, Denis Gifford lists 861 authors (alphabetically organized, Adams to Zola) whose work was adapted to film in the first twenty years of the industry. But what “adapted” meant in practice, of course, changed significantly across exactly this period.

In the pioneering years, making a film of a novel or play would rarely require an interest in the totality of the work, or even in its overall structural shape. The brevity of each exhibited film in this period did not allow for such comprehensive ambition. Rather the project was, in effect, to produce cinematically animated, brief, visual quotations from a work. Where possible, the cameos were attractively designed and entertainingly played but rarely under an obligation to generate narrative coherence across the ellipses between scenes.² Gunning has termed the privileging of isolated cameo references over a consistent narrative drive in such films a “peak moment” approach to a source (2004: 128). Choosing key moments from the inherited story – whenever possible those that already had some heightened recognition-value in the public consciousness – gave the advantage of speedy intelligibility for a picture-going audience independently able to contextualize the unplaced moment playing out before them. This text-allusive/audience-collusive approach produced a slew of short films that “quoted” selectively from literary sources in cinema’s first decade. Even post-1907, when the desire to tell a coherent story had become the usual aspiration for a film, film stories were still typically structured as a medley of strung-together “moments” rather than as a fluently progressive narrative. For this reason, they continued to depend upon an audience’s familiarity with the original, or upon its access to other sources of information beyond the film, to become meaningful in narrative terms.

Well into early cinema’s transitional period (c.1907–c.1913), therefore, literary films were frequently composed of an unapologetically bumpy sequence of the best-known dramatic and iconic scenes from their literary sources. These were familiar to many not only through direct access to the literary works themselves but also from exposure to artistic representations, edition illustrations, vaudeville sketches, satirical cartoons, and a wide variety of other forms in which many literary sources were culturally disseminated through the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. Thus it was, for example, that the Vitagraph Company of America’s 1909 *Oliver Twist* (dir. J. Stuart Blackton)³ could move apparently seamlessly from Oliver Twist’s mother dying to Oliver asking for “more” in the workhouse orphanage that needed, and received, no introduction, and from there straight to Oliver’s introduction to the Artful Dodger and Fagin. The story, and a fairly stable bank of related imagery, was sufficiently well known for an audience to be trusted to keep up across the narrative leaps. Understanding the savviness of its market in this way, Vitagraph did not need to invest in supernumerary plot-clarifying transitions between the “peak” moments that were, by implicit accord, most cherished in the popular consciousness and therefore most vital to include.

Vitagraph were, in fact, famously proficient at producing, marketing, and globally distributing popular, visually attractive but partial versions of literary classics (Uricchio and Pearson, 1993). In the five-year period between 1907 and 1912 alone, for example, they produced two films adapted from Dickens, three from Victor Hugo, two from Greek mythology, five from the Bible, twelve from Shakespeare, three from classic fairytales, and one each from William Thackeray, Oscar Wilde, Ellen Wood, Arthur Conan Doyle and Arthurian legend. This impressive legacy of literary adaptations, in fact, formed part of the company's campaign to be considered purveyors of quality cinema with artistic aspirations (Buchanan 2009: 105–46). In response to the release of their 1908 one-reel (c. twelve-minute) *Julius Caesar*, they were specifically commended by the *New York Dramatic Mirror* for having omitted all but “the vital scenes” (1908: 6). The action of such vigorously truncated versions of novels or plays necessarily moved swiftly from one dramatic highlight to another, offering a sequence of consolingly familiar, or near-familiar, scenes and thereby implicitly establishing and confirming an analogue version of these cultural works (in effect a “best of” abridgement) in which they could circulate manageably and more or less intelligibly to a broad market.

“Like a Cruikshank brought to life”: Literature “pictorialized”

Edison's catalogue entry for the “Trilby Death Scene” back in 1896 had included the descriptive sell: “The dramatis personae of this act are made up in exact imitation of the illustrations given in Du Maurier's book” (Herbert et al., 1996: 21). Identifying the costuming and look of the film characters as precise evocations of the illustrations published in *Trilby*⁴ was evidently considered a promotional boost for the film. It certainly signaled a desire to authenticate the film not only in relationship to the theatrical burlesque that was its most immediate, and declared, source, but also with the literary publication whose prior popularity had inspired that burlesque. From these early beginnings of layered adaptive referencing, the will specifically to “pictorialize” literature for the cinema then became part of the most prevalent early cinema terminology used in both trade press and popular review to describe what would now more typically be called the adaptation process. And sometimes, within the general project to “pictorialize,” specific illustrations or illustrators surfaced to give recognizable focus to the particular character of the “pictorializing” being undertaken.

British filmmaker Thomas Bentley adapted the work of several authors across the course of his filmmaking career, but it was Dickens who claimed his passion. In total he made eight Dickens films for four different production companies: *Oliver Twist* (Hepworth, 1912), *David Copperfield* (Hepworth, 1913), *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Hepworth, 1913), *The Chimes* (Hepworth, 1914), *Barnaby Rudge* (Hepworth, 1915), *Hard Times* (Transatlantic Pictures, 1915), another *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Welsh-Pearson, 1921), and *The Adventures of Mr Pickwick* (Ideal, 1921).⁵ Bentley's four-reel

Oliver Twist came out in 1912, amidst a rash of other Dickens tributes of various sorts in honor of the centenary of his birth. Upon its release, the reviewer for *Bioscope* expressed his appreciation for many aspects of this production, including set, costume, story-telling, and the cast. However, his special commendation was reserved for Willie West's "quite inimitable" performance as the Artful Dodger:

He whisks through the film with his tremendous tail coat draped about his body and trailing around his legs, with his shy, impish cock of the eye, and his immortal top hat wobbling in ancient but perilous state on his head, like a Cruikshank brought to life ("Oliver Twist," 1912: 281).

Part of the evident pleasure the reviewer takes in the film's aesthetics and performances derives from the way he sees the film connecting precisely and reassuringly with imported properties deemed "immortal" and with the precarious angle of hat placement declared "ancient." As the reviewer saw it, both the detail and the flavor of illustrator George Cruikshank's pictorial account of the Artful Dodger were discernibly retained, but simply now with the added virtue of an injection of movement (character "whisk[ing]", tail coat "drap[ing]", hat "wobbling", and so on). Or, in the analogous words of a subsequent review of Bentley's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1913), Bentley the filmmaker was, at root, "an illustrator" who had "the additional advantage of working in a living medium instead of in pen, pencil and paints" (*Bioscope*, 1914: 217).

Given the levels of public investment in, and sense of cultural ownership over, these novels, discussing the films as Dickensian (where the label was generously able to incorporate the Cruikshankian) but *with additional value*, as opposed to couching them apologetically as a reduced, diluted or highly compromised allusion to Dickens, probably revealed as much about the promotional needs of the market as it did about the specific character of the films themselves. The perceived levels of public investment were explicitly acknowledged in the praise lavished upon *Oliver Twist*. Not only was this film on offer as "one of the most accurately correct 'animated novels' yet done", but the *Bioscope* reviewer declared himself relieved that Bentley had not been tempted either to omit any key scenes ("Everything essential in or notable to the story has been included") or to interpolate any invented ones ("a particularly material consideration in the present instance where the original is well-known to practically everyone") ("Oliver Twist," 1912: 279). If "practically everyone" was a cultural stake-holder in how *Oliver Twist* was rendered on the screen, those amassed stake-holders, having handed over the price of their ticket, were then, it seems, owed the *Oliver Twist* they had previously imbibed from the Dickens/Cruikshank literary double act. In reality, many picture-goers might actually have encountered that literary double act through its subsequent diffused dissemination across other cultural forms – including, for example, in Thomas Bentley's own appearances impersonating Dickensian characters on the music-hall stage (MacFarlane, 2003: 59). At the turn of the century there was, as Russell Merritt reports, "a

considerable vogue for one-act versions of famous plays and literary works” for performance at fairgrounds and in vaudeville – a vogue to which D. W. Griffith had been amply exposed in his days as an actor in a touring company in ways that had a considerable influence upon his subsequent filmmaking:

Later, such sketches became Griffith’s principal source for his Biograph literary adaptations, the vital crib sheets that enabled him to film all those Great Works – the leviathan novels, Victorian poems, and short stories – without actually having to wade through them (Merritt, 1981: 6).

Griffith was, of course, far from alone in knowing his “leviathan novels” and other literary works chiefly through familiarity with popular performed abridgments. Nevertheless, the myth of unimpeded access to uncontaminated originals was strategically adhered to in promoting the cultural value of the work. From such a starting position, anything that unduly advertised the processes of transmediation in Dickensian filmmaking (plot restructurings or interpolations, innovative approaches to *mise-en-scène*, interventionist cinematography) was to be suppressed and the temptation to make interpretive expansions upon an original “well-known to practically everyone” eschewed. Meanwhile anything that contributed to persuading spectators they were being given renewed and undistorted access to the “immortal” and “ancient” qualities of the original, only now not just as novel but as “*animated* novel,” was to be commended – even if the undistorted access allegedly on offer was to an original that audiences might not, in fact, have encountered directly.

Some films worked harder than others on this unacknowledged agenda to suppress the signs of interpretive engagement for fear of being thought to be playing fast and loose with the specific character of their respected sources. In 1915, the American poet and early film theorist, Vachel Lindsay, argued that inherited literary and dramatic values were stifling cinema’s uninhibited engagements with its own “language.” He made the case that cinema should distance itself decisively from a trammeling theatrical heritage:

. . . the further [the motion picture] gets from Euripides, Ibsen, Shakespeare, or Molière – the more it becomes like a mural painting from which flashes of lightning come – the more it realizes its genius (Lindsay, 1970: 194).

Nevertheless, in adapting theatrical material, films of the transitional era were sometimes caught by a counter-impulse to signal a sustained allegiance to the medium of derivation of their source material, the stage. This was particularly true of Shakespearean filmmaking. While it sometimes broke free into freshly conceived ways of seeing and narrating, equally its blocking, cinematography, and performance codes sometimes timidly courted the look and feel of theatrical productions in an attempt, perhaps, to legitimize its own presumptuous project in adapting

Shakespeare for film at all. The intermittent adherence to a set of conventions more usually associated with stage practice was partly an unthinkingly atavistic approach to medium-appropriate codes, and partly a strategic move to telegraph an alignment with the theatrical conventions to which filmmakers of adapted theatrical material felt, or thought they should feel, a cultural allegiance.

The years 1908/1909 proved to be key years of vacillation for Shakespearean cinema in deciding whether to embrace a set of cinematic codes or to reassert a stubborn theatricality in styles of presentation. As this tussle was played out, sometimes both impulses – to produce an innovative and fluid piece of cinema on the one hand and to contain the will to innovate on the other – were illuminatingly co-present within a single film, as if in graphic and fraught testimony to some of the broader debates being conducted in the industry of the time. The Clarendon Film Company's *The Tempest* (dir. Percy Stow, 1908), for example, exhibits a medium-savvy delight in its capacity to evoke beautifully choreographed, tense drama through its own simple but effective arsenal of special effects for the storm and shipwreck scenes (layers of evocative superimposition, oddly angled shots, impressionist and dynamic edited sequences for the storm, savage lacerations made directly on to the film print to create suggestive streaks of lightning). And yet every expression of cinematic adventurousness in this film is countered by another of cinematic conservatism (shallow sets, theatrically blocked entrances and exits, cluttered frame composition, stage-bound performance trickery in the “magical” conjuration of doves, and so on). For all its undeniable charm, therefore, the film emerges as a document in stylistic indecision, poised between embracing and rejecting the cinematic resources it finds at its disposal in ways that, from the perspective of Shakespearean filmmaking of just a few years later, would seem notably coy (Buchanan, 2009: 78–88).⁶

However, the most striking and high profile example of strategically self-limiting filmmaking is to be found in Kalem's big-budget, five-reel *From the Manger to the Cross* (dir. Sidney Olcott, 1912) starring Robert Henderson-Bland as a gesturally graceful and neo-painterly Jesus.⁷ This production actively refuses the raft of cinematic story-telling devices potentially available to the medium of its moment out of conspicuous deference to its biblical subject matter. In “pictorializing” the Gospel account, Olcott (who proved a more technically adventurous director in other productions of a similar moment) eschewed even a modest use of cut-ins, mobile camera work, variable focal lengths, cross-cutting between planes of action and any suggestion of a psychologically investigative approach to character. In fact, *From the Manger to the Cross* is a film that almost gives the impression of having made self-conscious efforts to try and deny the fact that it was a film at all. It used extensive biblical quotation on its title cards, each in an antiquated and biblically evocative font and each conscientiously referenced by Bible chapter and verse. It superimposed its chapter titles (for example, “The Flight into Egypt,” “The Last Supper,” “The Crucifixion and Death”) over known paintings of the life of Christ. And its only minimally animated “action” was structured as a sequence of largely static vignettes,

many of which were recognizable as visual quotations from known religious paintings. The effect (and perhaps the purpose) of minimizing the animation of the action, reducing the camera work to static and distanced observation in scene-length takes (already stylistically retrograde by 1912) and alternating between the frequent use of direct biblical quotation and a series of close painterly references, is to simulate the appearance of an illustrated Bible whose illustrations happen, in this cinematic instantiation, to have been lightly (but only lightly) animated. Despite the film's title (whose *from* and *to* formulation misleadingly suggests that central to the film's interests will be dramatic pulse and narrative trajectory), the film therefore courted the feel of a conservatively illustrated, cinematic Gospel (Buchanan, 2007: 52–54; Keil, 1992: 112–20).

The conception of cinema implicitly (and unskeptically) peddled by those advocating, or working on, the production of “animated novels,” cinematic Gospels, and the “pictorializing” of literature in this way was one that celebrated cinema not as a vehicle of interpretive intervention and potential re-imagining, but as, in effect, itself a continuation and heightened version *of* literature – simply one now with the decorative embellishment of movement. Even the word “pictorialize” suggests that a process of direct lifting and relocation of a stable and knowable meaning from linguistic expression to pictorial form is possible. Or, to borrow Dudley Andrew's later terms, it “presume[s] the global signified of the original to be separable from its text if one believes it can be approximated by other sign clusters” (Andrew, 1984: 101). The more anxious, and consequently the more insistent end of the public discourse about literary filmmaking in the early cinema period, is, in effect, predicated upon just such a presumption of a text's meaning residing in something beyond, or separate from, the specificity of its medium of expression. To follow the logic of such a presumption, meaning may then be amenable to extraction from the particular mode of expression through which it was previously delivered (novel, play, biblical account) to be parceled up and more or less equally deliverable through an adjusted mode of expression (in this case, a film). According to such a premise, the uninterrupted transmission of signification from word to (animated) image was, therefore, a perfectly feasible ambition.

It is understandable that such an upbeat, if uninterrogated, position should have been rhetorically seductive for filmmakers working with literary source material in which the community felt some significant investment. In the main, however, it may have guided their own filmmaking practice rather less than it did the justificatory discussions of the films in the trade press (though the deliberate “stylistic retardation” (Keil, 1992: 112) of Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* makes this film a notable exception in this respect). Indeed, for the marketing men and trade reviewers tasked with reassuring the public about the worth of the adaptive enterprise, the rhetoric of transcriptive “fidelity” as evidenced in “animated novels,” cinematic Gospels, and “pictorialized” literature must sometimes have seemed not just seductive but imperative. The “global signified of the original” was, however, at no point in this process a stable entity, and the appropriative intervention of

other “sign clusters” (in this case through the communicative medium of film) inevitably worked its work to recast and remake the material in defiance of attempts to deny its interpretive involvement.

As the transitional era segued into that of the feature film (post c.1913), filmmakers and reviewers became braver about broadcasting the nature of the contemporary interventions that were in any case being made as an integral and inevitable part of the adaptation process. A comparison between *Oliver Twist* releases across this period is illuminating in this respect. Whereas the 1912 Bentley release had been described in terms of (a) its recognizable rendering of the detail of the Dickens novel that “practically everyone” already knew, and (b) its faithful engagements with Cruickshank’s illustrations, the 1916 *Oliver Twist* from U.S. production company Famous Players-Lasky was promotionally reviewed for its British release in the following terms:

[T]he Lasky “*Oliver Twist*” . . . was, of course, intended primarily, and will be appraised ultimately as an ornate and finished work of art. . . . The plot has been slightly adapted, it is true, to meet the demands of the screen, but such alterations are entirely justifiable and indeed inevitable. Although it will appeal strongly by its self-contained dramatic interest, even to those who have not read the novel, Lasky’s “*Oliver Twist*” impresses us mainly as a notable, beautiful, and comprehensive illustrated version *de luxe* of the original. From a purely pictorial point of view, it is perhaps the most striking Lasky film we remember. It is a series of noble studies in black-and-white, worthy of Brangwyn, but etched in living material. Almost every scene is a notable piece of composition, and in its examples of the bold, strong use of light and shade it is a work of pictorial art of which no painter would need to be ashamed (“The Lasky ‘*Oliver Twist*’,” 1917).

This film, in line with the earlier Dickens releases, is still being configured as an “illustrated version *de luxe* of the original”.⁸ However, the Bentley film’s appeal to a public armed with narrative foreknowledge has given way here to a film which is declared autonomously intelligible “even to those who have not read the novel”; and an audience imagined as caring deeply about the levels of fidelity to the original has been replaced by a film in which the plot has “been slightly adapted” in ways that are “entirely justifiable and indeed inevitable.” Moreover the conservative nostalgia of the Cruickshank reference that the earlier *Oliver Twist* had inspired has ceded to the suggestion that the use of “light and shade” in this film specifically calls to mind the work of the progressive, contemporary Anglo-Welsh multimedia artist Frank Brangwyn (1867–1956), known more for his contemporary and visually challenging approach to his subjects than for a respectful or sentimental interest in nineteenth-century pathos or a draughtsman-like interest in nineteenth-century realism. The adjustment of artistic allegiance as perceived across these reviews signals a shift in the interpretive priorities of the adaptive approach of the period more generally – from a process of detailed reconstructive homage to one of more freely licensed, creative engagement.

“The Great Art of the Lecturer”: Literary Films “Explained”

Above I discussed how adapted narratives for film in the pioneering and transitional years of early cinema were often constructed by a series of strung-together “moments” that might or might not follow on fluently from each other, and might or might not add up to a story that was autonomously intelligible. Through into the transitional era, I argued, films adapted from literary sources “continued to depend upon an audience’s familiarity with the original, or upon its access to other sources of information beyond the film, to become meaningful in narrative terms.” One of those supplementary “sources of information” upon which audiences could sometimes rely in order to make sense of films was the presence of a live film lecturer in the exhibition venue. Where present, it was the lecturer’s job to explain and enliven the moving pictures by means of a running commentary (see Altman, 2004: 133–55).

The “craze” (Musser, 1990a: 264) for employing a “narrator,” “lecturer,” or “explainer” in those picture house venues that could afford such a thing was at its height between 1907 and 1912 – that is, as story films were getting longer (two- and then three-reelers) and more complicated, but not necessarily yet always autonomously intelligible. In those cases where the triangulated relationship between players on the screen, lecturer, and picture-goers worked well, the lecturer’s mediating presence could provide a more intimate conduit into the subject viewed, helping to set the scene, sketch the history, voice the parts, and make the drama *live* in ways sensitively attuned to the artistry of the production, the twists and turns of the developing story and the interpretive needs of the particular assembled audience. Most of all, he could smooth over narrative ellipses and the stop–start progress of successive *tableaux* by weaving a series of on-screen “moments” into a continuous narrative and so the succession of scenes into a cohesive fictional *world*. About the 1909 release of *Oliver Twist*, I claimed above that “Vitagraph did not need to invest in supernumerary plot-clarifying transitions between the ‘peak’ moments” because they could trade explicitly on their audiences’ existing knowledge of the plot to make sense of the film. This was true, but it was also the case that production companies, Vitagraph included, specifically came to trade additionally upon the anticipated presence of a lecturer in many of their exhibition venues in the way in which they constructed their film narratives. That is, they could depend upon a supplementary source of explication being available to provide the links across their own narrative gaps – negotiating the transitions between Oliver in the workhouse and Oliver meeting the Artful Dodger in the 1909 Vitagraph *Oliver Twist*, for example, with an improvised or scripted “filler” narration. Some companies even published scripts to accompany their more culturally aspirational film releases for the use of local lecturers.

Where, however, the triangulated relationship between players on the screen, lecturer, and picture-goers worked less well, or the lecturer was less proficient, his

mediating presence could sometimes prove an active impediment to an appreciation of the production, an obtrusive obstacle to an audience's enjoyment of the pictures or simply a diversionary side-show (Buchanan, 2009: 12). Since a lecturer's manner of delivery could decisively affect an audience's experience of the films viewed, commentators were keen to establish a set of performance benchmarks to which lecturers should aspire. In August 1908, with characteristic clarity and emphasis, W. Stephen Bush – the prominent American commentator on the movies and himself a lecturer available for hire on the East Coast – laid out the ground rules as he saw them:

[A] good, descriptive and well-delivered lecture is . . . much appreciated by the people. . . . What, then, are the requirements of such a lecture? What are the requisite qualifications of the lecturer? An easy and perfect command of the English language is the first essential requirement. A clear, resonant voice, trained in public speaking, is the next. Some skill in elocution, rising, when occasion offers, to the heights of eloquence, is likewise indispensable. . . . The great art of the lecturer consists in making the picture plain and at the same time attractive. To achieve this, his language, while absolutely correct and free from the slightest blemish of slang or vulgarity, should be plain and simple. There are points of power and beauty in very many pictures, which appeal strongly to any artistic temperament, and to bring these out forcefully and effectively is the business of the lecturer (Bush, 1908: 136–7).

The ideal lecturer for Bush was both articulate and erudite and this vision of the refinement of the ideal lecturer was in tune with the industry's burgeoning "uplift movement" which was to find increasingly insistent expression over the next few years on both sides of the Atlantic. The uplift movement was designed to counter the charges of scurrility and degeneracy so often thrown at the industry in response to its history (salacious mutoscope reels), choice of subjects (sex and violence remaining popular sells), and suspect exhibition venues (whose darkened auditoria were thought to encourage vice of every sort). In the face of considerable negative publicity from influential quarters, prestige literary sources were vigorously harnessed and promoted by the film industry as key players in the campaign to overhaul its reputation and respectabilize its social standing. The lecturer's identity, dignity, and the air of cultured sophistication his presence could bring to the moving picture show, in collaboration with the elevated and allegedly elevating character of the films themselves, could help to assert the educative and edifying tone of the industry more generally. In effect, therefore, the lecturer was invited to fulfill a double role, combining the functional requirement to clarify a particular film with the symbolic requirement to legitimize the event of its exhibition.

As a potentially useful resource for other lecturers (and a small money-spinner for himself), Bush published some of his own independently produced lecture scripts – including for films on biblical subjects and for an adaptation of Balzac's novel *La Grande Bretèche* (Bush, 1910: 19). He also expressed his active disapproval of those less-than-generous exhibitors, as he saw them, who left picture-goers "bewildered"

by showing them a Shakespeare film, for example, *without* live simultaneous commentary (Bush, 1908: 136). While some audiences for Shakespeare films were denied the additional boon of a good lecture, however, others hit the jackpot in this respect. Through early 1913, for example, audiences for some screenings of the Shakespeare Film Company's early feature-length *Richard III* (dir. James Keane, 1912)⁹ in some exhibition venues on the East Coast of the United States were made privy to an accompanying lecture and recitation given by Frederick Warde, the famous stage classical actor who himself starred in the film (Buchanan, 2009: 10–14). Warde was known for his mellifluous voice as well as his strong physical presence and, given his own distinguished stage background, it must have been a pleasure for him, as well as for his audiences, to witness the intermedial reuniting of famous body with famous voice in the exhibition space for his screen performance as Richard III.

Warde – a rare celebrity high point on the film lecture circuit – was employed to give an unrivalled boost to the film he had himself starred in just as the practice of “lecturing to pictures” was on the wane. By 1913/14, other narrative, aesthetic, performance, and commercial agendas had combined to configure the presence of a lecturer a symbolic admission that the cinematic images themselves lacked sufficient clarity or eloquence to be able to communicate without supplementation. As popular, and sometimes as narratively necessary, as he had been through the transitional era, the figure of the lecturer had become, in effect, an industry anachronism.

With his demise, films had to shoulder their own story-telling obligations without external assistance. The result was a coming-of-age for the industry and, in particular, for the industry's approach to literary adaptations which had been some of the chief beneficiaries (and principal victims) of the lecturer's art. Through the latter half of the silent era (post-1913), and in amongst more ordinary fare, the film industry went on to produce many literary adaptations of vigor, clarity, imagination and considerable influence. From the provocative casting of Theda Bara in *Romeo and Juliet* (1916) to the delicious eeriness of Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1926); from the brilliantly executed actor doubling and touching introspection of Fox's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1917) to the entertaining excess of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923); from the comically nuanced performance of Asta Nielsen in *Hamlet* (1920) to the uncompromising spectacle of MGM's *Ben Hur* (1925); from the dramatic ambition of Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) to the dreamy extravagance of Douglas Fairbanks' *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924); from the titillating spirituality of Blanche Sweet in D. W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (1914) to the striking expressionist aesthetic of F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922)¹⁰ – the silent era witnessed literary adaptations of dynamism, invention, visual drama, emotional weight and interpretive import. But, as my select list of some personal adaptation highlights from the era also suggests, these resist homogenizing claims, collectively presenting a sample snapshot of filmmaking in the period nearly as varied in tone and character as the broader cinema histories from which they emerged and to which they vibrantly contributed.

NOTES

- 1 King John is commercially available on the BFI DVD *Silent Shakespeare* (hereafter *Silent Shakespeare*).
- 2 Though predominantly true, there were exceptions. *Scrooge; or, Marley's Ghost* (Paul's Animatograph Works: dir. W. R. Booth, 1901), for example, was 620 feet in length on release, with a runtime of c. eleven minutes, and ambitious in terms of narrative coherence. It is commercially available on the BFI DVD *Dickens Before Sound* (hereafter *Dickens Before Sound*).
- 3 The Vitagraph *Oliver Twist* is commercially available on *Dickens Before Sound*.
- 4 George du Maurier was both author and illustrator of *Trilby* (1894).
- 5 A print of the Bentley *Oliver Twist* is available to view at the Library of Congress, Washington DC. The Bentley *David Copperfield* is commercially available on *Dickens Before Sound*. The other titles are presumed lost.
- 6 The Clarendon *Tempest* is commercially available on *Silent Shakespeare*.
- 7 Kalem's *From the Manger to the Cross* is commercially available on Image Entertainment DVD.
- 8 The name of the reviewer is not given. However, it seems likely, both from probable review allocation practice on one trade journal, and from the similarity of the terms employed across reviews, that this was the same reviewer who had also previously been assigned Bentley's earlier Dickens films.
- 9 *Richard III* is commercially available on Kino International DVD.
- 10 The 1916 Fox *Romeo and Juliet* starring Bara is presumed lost (Buchanan, 2009: 202–16); Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1926) is commercially available (GMVS); the Fox *A Tale of Two Cities* (1917) starring William Farnum as both Carton and Darnay is intermittently available (Masterpiece Collection VHS) (see Buchanan with Newhouse, 2009); Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923) is commercially available in a boxed set with the 1956 version (Paramount Home Entertainment); the Asta Nielsen *Hamlet* (1920) is available (Edition Filmmuseum) (see Howard, 2009; Buchanan, 2009: 217–40); MGM's *Ben Hur* (1925) is available in a boxed set with the 1959 version (Warner Brothers Home Entertainment); Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) is available on Region 1 DVD (Kino); Raoul Walsh's *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) starring Fairbanks is commercially available (Elstree Hill); D. W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (1914) starring Blanche Sweet is commercially available (Bach Films) (see Buchanan, forthcoming); Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) is multiply commercially available (including on Elstree Hill).

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