

“THIS IS NOT DICKENS”:
FIDELITY, NOSTALGIA, AND ADAPTATION

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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Presented by Kristin Spooner

A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Nancy West

Professor Joanna Hearne

Professor Mary Kay Blakely

To Melis: for your listening ear and ceaseless encouragement.
To Scott: for the bag of M&M's, your patience, and the day trip to Fayette.
To Mom and Dad: for being proud of me, *ad infinitum*.

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Introduction



I never imagined I would spend so much time reading and analyzing the opinions of people who refer to themselves with sobriquets like “Spleen,” “Aimless-46,” “Lizardiharp,” and “Lovebeetree.” But that is precisely what I have done in this project, as these people, strange screen names and all, are among the thousands of “citizen critics”¹ who review films on the Internet. Not all reviewers create funky monikers for themselves when they have to post their names with their reviews, but they all apparently share a similar intrinsic motivation that pushes them to electronically publish their opinions of films. In this project, I examine those opinions, specifically the reviews of three Victorian novel film adaptations: Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), Roman Polanski’s *Oliver Twist* (2005), and Alfonso Cuarón’s *Great Expectations* (1998). I trace the public reception of these films by considering the reviews of Internet Movie Database citizen critics alongside the reviews of professional critics like Stanley Kauffman, Janet Maslin, David Edelstein, and others. In doing so, I look to see how fidelity discourse, the common language of adaptation studies, manifests itself in these reviews despite its limitations and the repeated calls of academics and scholars for its demise. I also discuss the factors that contribute to reviewers’ reliance on fidelity discourse.

Much of the fidelity discourse in these reviews is bound up in nostalgia and in the respondents’ visual conceptions of the Victorian era. In other words, the reviewers’

¹ Here and throughout this project, I use the term “citizen critics” to denote the nonprofessional critics who post film reviews on the Internet Movie Database. I am indebted to Rosa Eberly’s *Citizen Critics* for the phrase, which Eberly uses to describe the “nonexperts” (2) who have offered public criticism in response to twentieth-century literary controversies.

sense of what a Victorian film should be like derives not only from their associations with the source novels but also from their persistent nostalgia for an era in which they never lived. Since contemporary reviewers have not personally experienced the Victorian Age, they often regard nineteenth-century novels as authentic representations of a long-gone period, and thus measure the authenticity of the film's portrayal of the period by the film's faithfulness to the novel. The language of fidelity discourse reflects the reviewers' expectation that the novels' film adaptations also should serve as authentic representations of both the novels and the Victorian past, as the visual nature of film allows them to conceptualize the period more clearly. In short, this project explores the responses of critics as they assess whether the filmic adaptations of Victorian novels adequately fulfill their great expectations.



There has never been a better time to be a critic, in part because it has never been easier to be one. Thanks to the tremendous growth of the Internet, it is no longer difficult for people to distribute their opinions to a wide audience, whether they do so by writing blogs, creating personal homepages, posting on message boards and listservs, or offering their opinions on websites with spaces for user comments or customer reviews. Anyone with access to the Internet can become a film reviewer, and in a format more formal and substantive than a fleeting coffee-and-biscotti conversation with friends about the latest Jerry Bruckheimer blockbuster. Before the Internet became so accessible, there were essentially no opportunities for everyday filmgoers to publish their written reviews, save for occasional pieces in local newspapers. But, as P. David Marshall and Robert Burnett explain in their book *Web Theory: An Introduction*, the notion of “cultural production” is

“central to the meaning and use of the Web” (70). The authors explain that the standard term for someone who engages with the Web—an Internet “user”—is indicative of the technology’s interactive and productive nature. Words like “surfer” and “browser” are not fully accurate, as they imply a sense of limited and often casual engagement with the Web. According to Marshall and Burnett, the term “user” is much more fitting, as it denotes “a kind of active exchange that is central to the Web experience” (73). More significantly, the label of “user” designates “another clear defining characteristic of the Web: it is as much about looking, reading, observing, and browsing as it is about a kind of empowerment to *produce*” (73). With this “empowerment to produce,” the Internet allows for a shift: people are no longer a “passive public” but rather an “active audience” (3), citizens who are as interested in creating cultural products on the Web as they are in consuming them.

The evidence of such active Internet cultural production can be found on any website that provides “Customer Reviews” or “User Comments”; these days, people can electronically publish their opinions about everything from sports cars to vacuum cleaners to the latest DVD special edition of *The Wild Bunch*. Generally, the most widespread reviewing websites are those that deal in popular culture, and one such site is the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), which proclaims itself “Earth’s Biggest Movie Database.” While IMDb is perhaps best known for its extensive archive of film-related information, it also boasts an active “User Comments” feature, in which anyone with an e-mail address can post a review of any of IMDb’s 787,797 titles, nearly 350,000 of

which are theatrically-released films.² Casey McKittrick, who examines the presence of taboo themes in the IMDb User Comments of *Happiness* (1998) and *American Beauty* (1999), notes that IMDb “fosters an environment of recognizing online users as potential citizen-critics by providing a ‘platform’ for them to speak to other users,” which makes IMDb a “register of discretely posted critical pieces” (4). Other review-centered websites that promote the publishing of citizen critics’ film responses include Rotten Tomatoes (rottentomatoes.com), Film Freak Central (filmfreakcentral.net), and Metacritic (metacritic.com), but here, I focus only on the IMDb citizen reviews, in part to place reasonable parameters on my Internet research but also because of IMDb’s solid reputation and long-running presence as a popular and reputable source of film information.

As I explore the critical reception of three film adaptations of Victorian novels, I look to IMDb reviewers and to professional critics for insights. Although the two groups have their differences and are typically regarded as distinct categories of reviewers, the body of citizen critics’ reviews is too prolific and too rich to disregard in favor of the reviewers whose professional status gives them instant authority and cultural prestige. Plus, the Internet reviewers are not constrained by time or space limitations, and they are wholly internally motivated to offer their opinions. Such relative freedom and independence allows them to produce reviews that are honest and uninhibited, providing valuable and seemingly limitless resources for consideration.

² IMDb admits that these statistics change frequently, as it is constantly adding and revising information. The numbers I provide are current as of May 22, 2006; updates occur regularly on IMDb’s “Statistics” page.

Within this vast sample of reviews, patterns emerge, one of which is the prevalence of fidelity discourse in the critical responses. Fidelity discourse has long been the most widespread mode of analysis in the field of adaptation studies, as both professional critics and casual filmgoers often evaluate an adaptation's worth based on its degree of "faithfulness" to its source text, usually a work of literature (and often a novel). As John Desmond and Peter Hawkes explain in *Adaptation: Studying Film and Literature*, practitioners of the fidelity approach "tend to judge a film's merit based on whether the adaptation realizes successfully the essential narrative elements and core meanings of the printed texts" (2). In the article "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory," Thomas Leitch explains why fidelity discourse is such a fixture in adaptation studies: "A primary reason that adaptation study remains obsessed with fidelity as a criterion for evaluation is that adaptations raise questions about the nature of authorship that would be difficult to answer without the bulwark of fidelity" (161-62). Essentially, the genre of film adaptation foregrounds issues of authorship, and fidelity discourse has long provided a sturdy and accessible way of exploring those issues.

However, most current film studies scholars, including Desmond and Hawkes, recognize that there are a number of problems with fidelity-based evaluations: who or what determines the difference between "success" and "failure"? How are a text's "essential narrative elements and core meanings" determined—and is it even possible to identify such intangible facets of a work? In "Adaptations: The Contemporary Dilemmas," Imelda Whelehan suggests that such a feat is impossible, as the practices of fidelity discourse are full of "problems" and "pitfalls." According to Whelehan, one of those major pitfalls involves the "intensely subjective criteria which must be applied in

order to determine the degree to which the film is ‘successful’ in extracting the ‘essence’ of the text” (3). And although most scholars admit that comparisons are inevitable when dealing with film adaptations, Desmond and Hawkes argue that critics who adhere to the fidelity approach “often ignore” its problems (2), an assessment with which Robert Stam strongly agrees.

In his Introduction to *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, Stam notes that fidelity discourse has long been the “conventional language of adaptation criticism,” but he calls it a “profoundly moralistic” language, laden with terms that imply cinema “has somehow done a disservice to literature” (3). Stam lists a number of terms that are commonplace in adaptation discourse: “infidelity,” “betrayal,” “vulgarization,” “violation,” and “deformation,” among others. These words characterize the “standard rhetoric” of adaptation discourse and employ “an elegiac discourse of loss, lamenting what has been ‘lost’ in the transition from novel to film, while ignoring what has been ‘gained’” (3). According to Stam, fidelity discourse has many failings, including its reliance on “essentialist arguments” that assume that “a novel ‘contains’ an extractable ‘essence’” that “can be ‘delivered’ by an adaptation” (15), a point that Whelehan, Desmond, and Hawkes also emphasize. And yet, cinematic adaptations continue to be held “to an absurdly rigorous standard of ‘fidelity,’” particularly when they are adaptations of novels (Stam 15). Stam calls for an end to such modes of analysis, contending that fidelity discourse “subtly reinscribes the axiomatic superiority of literature to film,” an evaluative consequence that is neither fair to the films themselves nor particularly useful to the field of film adaptation studies.

Therefore, Stam advocates “a new language and a new set of tropes” with which to speak about film adaptation (24), a move echoed by other scholars, including Whelehan, James Naremore, and Brian McFarlane. Stam’s work is most specific about the possibilities and need for change in adaptation studies, and suggests that we rely more heavily on notions of narratology, intertextuality, and transtextuality, à la the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Gérard Genette. Stam draws on Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, which “refers in the broadest sense to the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture,” as an instructive model for adaptation studies, as it emphasizes that every adaptation “‘points’ in many directions, back, forward, and sideways” rather than sits squarely positioned as part of the limited “dyadic source/adaptation model” (27). Stam also argues that an approach derived from Gérard Genette’s theories of “transtextuality” is potentially useful for understanding the “directions” in which an adaptation may point. Although Genette’s concepts do not overtly address film, they deal with “‘all that which puts one text in relation, whether manifest or secret, with other texts,’” and Stam contends that Genette’s theories “can be extrapolated for film and for adaptation” (27). In particular, Stam identifies Genette’s fifth category of transtextuality, “hypertextuality,” as particularly relevant to the study of adaptation, as it refers “to the relation between one text [the ‘hypertext’]” and “an anterior text [the ‘hypotext’]” and how the hypertext “transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends” the hypotext (31). So, in this project, Genette’s theory of hypertextuality refers to the ways in which the hypotexts—the novels—have been modified by specific hypertexts: the adaptations.

Stam argues that Genette's focus on "narratology" can provide "an analytical/practical model for addressing actual adaptations" (32). Since many questions about film adaptation "have to do with the modifications and permutations of the story," a narratological approach is particularly fruitful for adaptation, particularly when one focuses on three of Genette's primary categories of order, duration, and frequency (32), which provide a vocabulary for talking about the foundational elements of all narrative structures. Stam extends Genette's theory to the field of film adaptation by suggesting what he calls a "comparative narratology" as a means of analyzing two "semiotically different texts relaying the same narrative." In doing so, Stam emphasizes a central two-part question: "What events from the novel's story have been eliminated, added, or changed in the adaptation, and, more important, why?" (34). If we attempt to answer both parts of this query, Stam argues that we will make more significant and fruitful inquiries about adaptations: "what principle guides the process of selection or 'triage' when one is adapting a novel? What is the drift of these changes and alterations? What principles orient the choices?" (34). According to Stam, focusing on these questions while studying adaptations can help us have productive analytical discussions that are "less moralistic" and "less implicated in unacknowledged hierarchies" (46).

Film scholar Brian McFarlane backs Stam's push for change and echoes his concerns. In his article "'It Wasn't Like that in the Book,'" McFarlane explains that audience members who view adaptations with the hope that the film will replicate its novelistic source are feeding one of the main problems of fidelity discourse, in that they help "set up a sort of Leavisite evaluative judgment, a high culture/popular culture hierarchy, in which film inevitably comes below/behind the literary text" (par. 3).

McFarlane points out that fidelity discourse is “more enduring and pervasive than any other in relation to filmgoing,” and he believes that this natural tendency to engage in fidelity-based conversations stems from their non-threatening and accessible nature, for adaptation discourse “is a subject on which everyone feels able to have an opinion, and most opinions, from the casually conversational to exegeses in learned journals, still tend to foreground the criterion of fidelity, whether in explicit terms or by tacit assumption” (par. 7). McFarlane observes that when we leave the movie theater after watching an adaptation, we “rarely hear people saying ‘What sophisticated control of the *mise-en-scène*’ or ‘Did you notice the poetic use of lap dissolves?,’” but we *are* very likely to hear comments like, “‘Why did they change the ending?’” or “‘I think I liked the book better’” (par. 7).

Furthermore, it is even more likely that viewers will feel able to have opinions about adaptations that strike them as familiar, such as the film adaptations of classic Victorian novels. Films derived from Victorian novels seem to blur the distinction between high culture and popular culture on their own, as the prestige and quality commonly associated with classic Victorian novels combines with film, an art form that began as lowbrow entertainment and is now consumed on a daily basis by millions of people. In addition, the responses to film adaptations of Victorian novels are particularly rich for examination because nineteenth-century novels are among the works most securely entrenched in the canon, and those which are most often referred to as “classics”: Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *Great Expectations*; Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*; Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and *Far From the*

Madding Crowd; Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; and William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, to name only a few. Thus, many people feel as though they can form opinions about movies that attempt to adapt such well-known and culturally inscribed works, and that feeling of authority and expertise is reflected in the plethora of reviews that concern nineteenth-century novel film adaptations on IMDb.

Also, in addition to being “classics,” Victorian novels are extremely audience-friendly, one of the reasons they are among the most frequently adapted works in all of literature, perhaps rivaled only by the plays of William Shakespeare. In “Film and the Reign of Adaptation,” James Naremore discusses the growth and development of the Hollywood studio system, and he explains that often, “the most adaptable sources for movies were the ‘readerly’ texts of the nineteenth century,” which were considered much more pleasing and suitable for audiences than the “‘writerly’ texts of high modernism” (5). Readers are drawn to nineteenth-century novels for their interesting and intricate plots, their vividly drawn characters, and for the nostalgia-inducing descriptions of a time now long past. Therefore, focusing on the adaptations of the works of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, two of the nineteenth century's most enduring and prolific authors, ensures that both citizen and professional critics alike will have much to say.

These Victorian novels that produce adaptations so likely to generate discussion also do so in part because they are original works, which gives them a degree of authenticity that cannot be replicated by any subsequent version. As Thomas Leitch reasons, “Like translations to a new language, adaptations will always reveal their sources' superiority because whatever their faults, the source texts will always be better at

being themselves” (161). In this comment, Leitch does not advocate fidelity discourse nor argue for the “superiority” of source texts; rather, he logically points out that the source texts will always have their originality as a defining feature—they “will always be better at being themselves.” Such a declaration is aligned with Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “aura” of a work of art. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin explores the relationship between art and the emerging technological and mechanical advances of the 1930s, and he asserts that for a work of art, the “presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (1169). Essentially, Benjamin believes that mechanical reproductions, such as films and prints of paintings, can never quite equal the greatness of the originals, as “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place it happens to be” (1168). As Susan Johnston explains in her article about adaptation and the historical picturesque, Benjamin believes that mechanical reproduction challenges “the stability of [an] object,” a work of art’s “ongoing existence...as itself,” and thus decreases its authority or “aura,” which Benjamin identifies as that which ““withers in the age of mechanical reproduction”” (Johnston par. 8).

But Benjamin also contends that the weakening of the aura creates opportunities. Because mechanical reproduction detaches “the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” and substitutes “a plurality of copies for a unique existence,” it contributes to a “tremendous shattering of tradition” that allows for and encourages social and political agency (1169-70). Benjamin explains:

...for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. (1172)

Benjamin’s diction in this passage is telling; his designation of mechanical reproduction as a process that emancipates art from living a “parasitical” existence, tied to its origin and creator, infuses mechanical reproduction with power and potential. He indicates that the age of mechanical reproduction can usher in political change, as people no longer feel enslaved by “ritual,” by reverence to or regard for a work’s original artist, and such freedom allows them to critique and view art without feeling restricted by the prestigious reputations of particular works. In this sense, film adaptations do precisely what Benjamin imagined they would do: the medium of film “releases” a novel from its original trappings as a work of literature (while also capitalizing on those original trappings) and offers it to a wider public audience. Moreover, the current prevalence of the Internet seems to take this release a step further: films emancipate novels’ stories from their literary origins, and then the Internet reinforces the cultural pervasiveness of the stories by allowing people to discuss them openly and as much as they please,

strengthening their presence of the original works well beyond the scope of their initial forms.

Often, reviewers' discussions about Victorian film adaptations include references to the source's aura, albeit without the use of Benjamin's terms. Viewers of adaptations often bemoan the loss of the source text's "essence" or of the original author's "intent"—or they hail a film for "getting it right," "capturing the spirit" of a novel, or presenting the story precisely as "the author would have liked." Despite many scholars' adamant insistence that it is impossible to objectively determine a novel's "essence," this sort of reviewing rhetoric assesses whether the aura emerges unscathed from or is somehow damaged by the process of film adaptation. But while the reviewers who engage in this type of fidelity discourse tend to focus on what the original novel "loses" in the process of film adaptation, reviewers of Victorian novel film adaptations also show their preoccupation with another loss: that of the Victorian past. In a collection of essays entitled *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, Jennifer Green-Lewis explains, "Loss, after all, is the precondition of nostalgia, and whatever is feared lost is fetishized by its association, at times its conflation, with the imagined primary experience that initially shaped identity" (45). Green-Lewis' essay, "At Home in the Nineteenth Century: Photography, Nostalgia, and the Will to Authenticity," not only establishes the formative role of loss as the "precondition" of nostalgic yearning, but it also examines recent "noncanonical re-representation of the nineteenth century" as "instructive" about postmodernity and the ways in which our current culture shapes its recollections of the past (30). Green-Lewis focuses her discussion on visual Victoriana, particularly photographs, and she argues that our

“relentless memorialization” and popular definition of the Victorians show that we conceptualize the Victorian age *aesthetically* rather than historically (30). Green-Lewis points out that the past always retains a degree of cultural authority, but she believes that the current authority of the past is especially strong and that the “popular shape of the authoritative past is identifiably Victorian.” She notes that when advertisers offer vague terms like “yesteryear” or “olde worlde,” what they mean is something “vaguely Victorian;” essentially, Green-Lewis argues that “when we want to reinvent and revisit the past,” we “choose the nineteenth century” as the site (30).

Green-Lewis’ analysis of our visual relationships with the nineteenth-century indicates that there is a prevalent and pervasive longing for the Victorian age, that when we think of a generalized notion of the past, the images that pop into our heads are Victorian in nature. Green-Lewis points to the availability and rising popularity of Victorian-era photographs as a reason for this nostalgic tendency: “just as other historical artifacts affirm for many people a connection with a previous human intelligence, so old photographs, their negatives (and subjects) long gone, assume the aura of originals, not merely in terms of their economic value, but as points of reference or departure” (32). In her explanation of how old photographs can function as “points of reference” for the Victorian past, Green-Lewis also refers to the “aura” of the photographs, noting that they take on an original and authentic presence because the actual “originals”—the photographic negatives and the people featured in the photographs—no longer exist.

Although Green-Lewis does not examine films set in the Victorian era, her analysis seems applicable within the realm of nineteenth-century film adaptation as well. Film is a decidedly visual medium, and most people do not have more than a passing

acquaintance with photographs from the Victorian epoch—they simply do not have regular access to such artifacts. However, most people do have ready access to films, both in the theaters and on DVD and video, and there are very few people who have not seen a film set in the Victorian period, whether it is a made-for-television holiday presentation of *A Christmas Carol* or one of the many Masterpiece Theatre productions. And as Fred Davis explains in *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, our current “landscape of collective nostalgia” is now inhabited increasingly “and perhaps even predominantly by media creations, personalities, and allusions” (125). So much of what we now “remember” nostalgically comes from media products, and since we cannot truly recall what it was like to live in the Victorian period, we look to “media creations,” like films, to construct the matter for our memories. As a consequence, a Victorian film adaptation, especially a faithful one, can take on an authentic presence, serving as a “point of reference” by which we envision and judge all things Victorian.

In the chapters that follow, I discuss film criticism that analyzes authenticity and debates fidelity, that works to be authoritative and informative, and that shows there is much more substance to the reviews of citizen critics than authorial monikers like “Spleen” and “Lovebeetree” might suggest. These discussions indicate that we need to proceed cautiously before wholeheartedly agreeing with Stam’s and others’ sweeping dismissals of fidelity discourse’s value and instead search for the value in such a pervasive discourse. Rather than rejecting the current approaches and moving on to look for other ways of considering film adaptation, we first need to study how fidelity discourse operates and try to understand why it continues to be such a ubiquitous presence in adaptation studies.

Chapter 1



In her *Salon* review of Joe Wright's film *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), Stephanie Zacharek declares, "Austen's novel [*Pride and Prejudice*]...is one of the most fiercely beloved books in the English language, and those of us who love it are ferociously protective of the characters at the center of it" (par. 3). Keira Knightley, who plays Elizabeth Bennet in Wright's film, concurs with Zacharek; in a special feature on the film's DVD, Knightley explains that after reading *Pride and Prejudice*, "you sort of feel like you own [Elizabeth Bennet], and I'm sure everybody feels the same way." Tom Hollander, who plays Mr. Collins in the film, has also noticed the possessiveness of the novel's fans. He notes that when people discover that he is a cast member of *Pride & Prejudice*, everyone—though the women in particular—have similar reactions: they immediately want to know which actors and actresses play which roles, and if they disapprove of the casting choices, they have no qualms about saying, "'Well, that's completely wrong.'" Hollander explains that these fans react as they do "because they all feel that they own [Austen's novel]...as if it's their story and they wrote it."

Hollander and Knightley are right. The reviews of Joe Wright's film *Pride & Prejudice* are saturated with fidelity discourse, as apparently hundreds of reviewers feel as though "they own" Austen's novel and thus have the right and the ability to judge how well a film adapts it. Fidelity-based critiques in which the filmgoers compare the adaptation directly to the novel are prevalent in these reviews, significantly more so than in the responses to the two other adaptations that I will discuss in this project. And so, my focus in this chapter centers on examining why the Austen adaptation in particular

provokes such a considerable number of fidelity-themed reviews, and in doing so, I contend that while some of the fidelity discourse derives from the reviewers' fervent loyalty to Austen's novel, a great deal of the reviewers' fidelity discourse stems from a nostalgic yearning for the Victorian past.

For some critics, like *Salon's* Zacharek, loving Austen's novel and wanting to protect its integrity does not mean that a film adaptation of the novel has to unerringly replicate it; instead, the film should unearth the novel's innate vitality, as Zacharek believes *Pride & Prejudice* does: "Wright is fearless in his handling of the characters, refusing to bow to their iconic stature. It's as if he's unraveled every golden thread we've spun around Elizabeth and Darcy over the years to reveal living, breathing people underneath. He's saved them from the mummification of our love" (par. 3). Zacharek calls Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* a "blissful, blazingly intelligent adaptation" and says that there "isn't a frame in the picture that doesn't feel alive and immediate, instead of merely faithful" (par. 1-2). Zacharek's designation of the difference between a film adaptation that is "alive and immediate" and one that is simply "faithful" runs throughout her lengthy, praise-laden review of Wright's film, underscoring her fervent belief that her beloved characters should be invigorated by film rather than merely translated, detail by precious detail.

Zacharek recognizes the "iconic stature" of *Pride and Prejudice*, and with her description of how Wright's film unravels the protective "golden thread[s]" that the novel's ardent fans have reverently wrapped around the characters, she identifies the palpable force with which readers value and defend the integrity of the novel. Zacharek enters into a fidelity-based conversation, but she situates herself as quite distinct from the

Austen purists who want to see every line of dialogue, every Empire-waisted gown, and every lampshade from the novel transferred directly to the screen. She loves Wright's film because it "saves" the novel's characters, but it does not save them by being utterly faithful in their novel-to-film transformations; instead, the film saves and actually revitalizes the essence of Austen's novel and the characters its readers so fiercely protect by *releasing* them from the "mummification of our love"—they "come alive" on the screen rather than remain stiflingly contained by the boundaries of the novel.

However, although Zacharek is thrilled by the ways in which Wright's film rejuvenates the novel, many other passionate fans of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* blanch at the film, citing the changes and omissions the film makes in adapting the novel as damaging rather than invigorating. Such fidelity-based discussions of films adapted from Jane Austen's novels are nothing new, as there are always particularly heated debates about how screenwriters and directors can best translate the "iconic" and "beloved" works of Jane Austen into film. In the past decade or so, it has seemed as though Jane Austen's presence in film has been as commonplace as Denzel Washington's or Julia Roberts'; in the late 1990s alone, four adaptations of Austen's novels hit movie theaters:³ *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility* in 1995, *Emma* in 1996, and *Mansfield Park* in 1999. Such recent big-screen visibility has caused a number of critics to feel as though Austen's novels are standard adaptation fare: *The New Yorker*'s Anthony Lane wearily begins his brief review of Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* with the line, "Yet another Jane Austen adaptation. She must have one hell of an agent," *Rolling Stone*'s Peter

³ Here I count only the straightforward adaptations, excluding modernizations and updates such as Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), loosely based on Austen's *Emma*.

Travers begins his review by contending, “screen and TV adaptations of Jane Austen’s most popular novel are nothing new” (par. 1), and Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly* calls Wright’s film “the dozenth adaptation” of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (par.1).

However, these critics are rather lax in their generalizations, as Austen’s novels, while popular and well known, are not actually adapted for the screen with much regularity. The Internet Movie Database credits Austen as a writer on only 27 films, beginning with a 1938 television adaptation, and only ten of those films are feature films—the rest are made-for-television flicks or miniseries. Austen’s total screen credits seem particularly modest when compared to Charles Dickens’ total: 226 screenwriting credits over a period of nearly 100 years, beginning in 1897 (“Charles Dickens”). Granted, Dickens wrote more full-length works than did Austen, but still—his screen credits lap Austen’s nine times over. In fact, prior to 2005, Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* had been straightforwardly adapted for the big screen only once, a 1940 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) feature film starring Laurence Olivier and Greer Garson, and only one other “loose” filmic derivative of the novel preceded Wright’s film: Gurinder Chadha’s modernized Bollywood musical called *Bride and Prejudice*, which was released in 2004.

Therefore, while the reviewers’ reliance on fidelity discourse in their assessments of Wright’s film is certainly in part due to their attachment to and association with Austen’s extremely popular novel, the prevalence of traditional fidelity-laden critiques in the reviews is also amplified by the relative scarcity of *Pride and Prejudice* film

adaptations. Filmgoers' natural inclination when viewing an adaptation is to compare it to its source or to a version of it that came before; when few filmic derivatives of a source text exist, as is the case with *Pride and Prejudice*, the authority of the original novel remains especially strong because the original has been "modified" to a lesser degree and has not been thrust into the public sphere with those changes. Consequently, viewers are even more dependent on the original novel when they attempt to judge the quality and "success" of a film adaptation, as the original novelistic source remains relatively pure and untouched in their minds—and thus, also definitive. Accordingly, most of the reviews that exhibit either strains or wallops of fidelity discourse in their judgments of Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* do so in a cut-and-dried manner: they either acclaim the film for its overall excellence and for capturing the "essence" of Austen's novel, or they are disappointed and possibly aghast that the film "leaves out" so much of what is central to the novel.⁴ But even when the reviews hail the film for its fidelity to the novel, they do not generally praise the film for its precise, detail-by-detail translation of novel to film; instead, the reviewers are pleased by the way the novel's "flavor" or "spirit"—the general tone, ambiance, and overarching themes of the novel—are communicated on the big screen, expressions that are clearly reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura.

For instance, when IMDb user "Sharon2610" reviews Wright's *Pride & Prejudice*, she acknowledges that the film "does not strictly adhere to the novel, but it captures the

⁴ The definitions of "what is central" to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* vary from review to review, as evidenced below, but to name a few: true romance, class satire, authentic costumes and settings, verbal wit, notions of family and sacrifice, and whether or not Lady Catherine would actually leave her estate in the middle of the night to accost Elizabeth in the Bennets' home.

essence of what Austen's story is all about" (10/26/2005).⁵ Sharon2610 believes that "the main elements of the story are conveyed convincingly" and that the film as a whole is "a wonderful adaptation that encompasses the real essence of the novel," so much so that it "has made [her] pick up Miss Austen once again"—and she is already "on page 106." For Sharon2610, Wright's film succeeds because it conveys the intangible and somewhat indescribable (as evidenced by her use of the vague word "essence" twice in her short review) "feel" of Austen's novel, which has spurred her to reread the original novel and revisit the film's source. Similarly, "Jagamar1" from the United States posits that *Pride & Prejudice* "took license regarding some of the verbiage and detail of the novel, but it ultimately captured the characters, their transformations, their strengths, their vulnerabilities and their passions" (11/12/2005). The "ultimate capture" of Austen's novel is what really matters to Jagamar1, and while continuing to emphasize the overall success of the film, she even offers a reason for the "license" the film has to take:

You simply cannot do a definitive work on *Pride and Prejudice* in two hours. And this film doesn't try. But what it does attempt—to capture the story and the characters, it does beautifully. [...] While it has to rush and skimp on scenes and characters, it is the most authentic and true to the spirit of the novel version that I have ever seen.

Even though the film has "to rush and skimp," it is still "authentic" and "true to the spirit" of Austen's novel. Like Jagamar1, IMDb reviewer "Lindewen" praises the film

⁵ In my parenthetical citations of the citizen critics' reviews, I provide the date on which each critic posted his or her review on the Internet Movie Database. All reviews can be found by visiting each film's respective "User Comments" page on IMDb (www.imdb.com).

for conveying the essence of Austen and excuses the film for its omissions and its inability to be a “definitive work,” also citing the standard time frame of a Hollywood film as an unavoidable restriction for these adaptations. Lindewen writes, “I was so happy that this new adaptation managed to capture the flavour of the book, without giving up too much. Sure, everyone complains when scenes are cut, but how else are you supposed to adapt a novel without making it 6 hours long?” (11/19/2005). Lindewen also thinks the film’s dialogue “stayed very true to the book when it could, [and] was witty, interesting, and made me laugh in all the right places.”

In their assessments of the film’s fidelity to Austen’s novel, these reviewers allow for some flexibility, for exceptions and limitations, in particular by allowing for one of the main distinctions between a novel and film: the amount of “space” allowed by each medium. Although numerous film scholars stress that “cinema has not lesser but rather greater resources for expression than the novel” (Stam 18), many reviewers do not share that mindset. The language that these reviewers use to describe the limitations imposed by the medium of film—you “cannot” make a definitive film of *Pride and Prejudice*, the film rushes when “it has to,” the dialogue stayed true to the book “when it could”—implies that film faces certain obstacles and restrictions that a novel does not, an implication that works to subtly reinscribe the superiority of literature over film.

This reassertion of the novel’s inherent supremacy over its filmic offspring also occurs in other fidelity-laced reviews, but these negative reviews are void of subtlety and instead overtly blast Wright and screenwriter Deborah Moggach for royally screwing up

Austen's iconic novel. Even though Moggach says she "tried to stay truthful to the book" and "[hasn't] changed a lot" of Austen's "perfect three-act structure" ("About the Production," par. 9), many citizen critics disagree. IMDb user "Me-687" posted a review of *Pride & Prejudice* entitled "Disgrace to the novel and Jane Austen," and she writes, "everything about [the film] is wrong; it was like they were filming a different book" (9/18/2005). Me-687 criticizes nearly every element of the film for the ways it fails to live up to the novel: Keira Knightley's performance is "too modern" and "dull"; Bingley is "stupid and dippy"; the fact that Mr. Bennet answers the door in the middle of the night is also "stupid"; portraying the Bennets as farmers is "incorrect and ludicrous"; Georgiana Darcy is "ugly and old"; and even the houses are "wrong for their parts." According to Me-687, Wright's film is "historically inaccurate" and has an "unsatisfying" ending, and she "hated it so much" because "not only was it nothing like the book," but she worries "that for many people it will be their first experience of this great novel and it will give them the worst possible idea of it." This reviewer's harsh comments, saturated with fidelity-oriented words and phrases like "disgrace," "inaccurate," and "nothing like the book," not only convey her displeasure with the film's failings but also express a concern that viewing this film will tarnish the novel's value by giving people "the worst possible idea" of the book, which Me-687 finds completely unacceptable. As is common in fidelity discourse, this reviewer expresses a palpable fear that a poor film adaptation of a beloved novel can actually damage the integrity of the novel itself. As Susan Johnston explains, the aura of an "authentic object," like Austen's novel, derives from the way the

object “testifies to the history it has witnessed.” When the original disappears or, in this case, is threatened by the changes imposed by mechanical reproduction, the “testimony of the object” is challenged, diminishing its aura (par. 9). What Me-687 fears is that the testimony of Dickens’ novel has been weakened because one of its “reproductions” is flawed.

Reviewer “Arichis” is just as blunt as Me-687 when he describes the damage Wright’s film does to Austen’s novel, and he gives Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* a scathing 1-star response, simply titled “Ouch.” Arichis gets straight to his main point: “This film is bad. There are no words that do justice to what this film has done to the most beloved work of one of the greatest English authors. To start with, the film cannot seem to decide when it is set. We see scenes and costumes from a plethora of historical periods” and the dialogue “cannot decide if it wants to be modern or self-consciously antiquated” (9/25/2005). Arichis also declares that the characters’ manners “wouldn’t fit into any period” and that the decent actors “collapse under an absurd script,” and he even tries to find a logical reason for the film’s failure, finally figuring that “the makers of this film have never read the book or were just having a laugh.” He finishes his review with a fervent plea to IMDb review readers: “Please do not go to see this film, as giving them money would only serve to encourage this sort of thing.” In a gesture akin to Me-687’s fretting about how the film will soil the novel, Arichis also expresses a fear that making these “sorts” of adaptations will only continue to defame the “beloved work” of Austen

and diminish the novel's aura. He even fashions his review as a sort of preventative mechanism, offering a warning and plea to potential filmgoers everywhere.

Other negative reviews (of which there are many, despite the film's overall positive 7.7/10 rating on the User Rating scale) also illustrate the grand force with which fidelity concerns shape viewers' impressions of Victorian film adaptations. London's "Mvm-uk" calls the film "a deeply dumbed-down version of Austen" (9/22/2005), and "Tiger-li" calls *Pride & Prejudice* "absolutely abysmal" and bemoans its "complete lack of the classic wit of Jane Austen" (10/7/2005). "Ferrerogrrl" from Seattle warns readers to "bid adieu to Austen's eloquence, subtlety and wit" if they see the film, contending that *Pride & Prejudice* makes "a travesty of the true spirit of Austen's most beloved work" (11/22/2005). Numerous reviewers speak on behalf of Austen and make claims about what her long-dead but still respectable self would be doing if she had to witness these films: "Jane Austen is spinning in her grave," claims "Mkazmierczak" (11/11/2005); "Michaelowen75" from Australia thinks that Austen is not necessarily spinning but "convulsing in her grave" (10/21/2005); and "Lovebeetree" offers a slight variation on the theme: "Jane Austen would be rolling over in her grave at [the] thought" of someone comparing Wright's film to her novel (9/29/2005).

But possibly the most impassioned unfavorable response to Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* comes from the United Kingdom's "Seraph_sister," whose 834-word review begins, "From the film's first shot—Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet wandering reading through a field at dawn, thus invoking all the clichés cinema has developed to

address the phenomenon of the strong-minded rebellious female character in period drama—I knew I was in for something to make me want to kill myself” (9/29/2005). Seraph_sister’s strident adoration of Austen’s novel is evident in her review, as she makes consistent references to the book’s themes, details, and components throughout her assessment of the film, and her diction makes it clear that the novel reigns unquestionably superior:

Joe Wright seemed not only to have not read the book, but to be under the regrettable misapprehension that what he was filming was not in fact Jane Austen’s subtle, nuanced comedy of manners conducted through sparkling, delicate social interaction in eighteenth century English drawing-rooms, but a sort of U-certificate *Wuthering Heights*.

For Seraph_sister, the novel is “subtle,” “nuanced,” and “sparkling”; the film is clumsy, plain, and void of emotional impact, as bland as a U-certificate film watered down for all ages.

Although Seraph_sister has a tendency to be somewhat overdramatic, as evidenced by her declaration of suicidal emotions in the review’s opening line, her response typifies many of the *Pride & Prejudice* reviews: long, passionate, specific, and articulate. Many reviews range from 600-900 words in length, and several reviews approach 1,000 words, the equivalent of a four-page, double-spaced academic essay—quite a feat for reviewers posting merely out of their desire to inform others, to convey their opinions about a film, or simply because they enjoy writing. Often, their

vocabularies and command of language are impressive: reviewer “Mercy Bell” writes vividly and energetically throughout her 978-word response, describing the film’s “ensemble and mise-en-scene” as “electric” and offering a lovely, perceptive comment about the camera work: “The camera spryly edges in and out of rooms and conversations instead of sitting arthritically in a corner” (11/9/2005). Reviewer “Philby-3” sprinkles his review with colorful words and phrases that showcase an impressive vocabulary—he calls Judi Dench’s Lady Catherine de Bourgh “more of a termagant than a monster of aristocratic hauteur” and uses the words “expunge,” “anomaly,” and “cad” (10/22/2005). Many of the citizen critics’ reviews are so soundly written that in a blind test, a person would be hard-pressed to distinguish between a professional and a nonprofessional *Pride & Prejudice* review.

And although there is a rather negligible gap separating the professionals’ and the nonprofessionals’ reviews of *Pride & Prejudice*, the citizen critics are more likely than the professional critics to write reviews that center almost exclusively on notions of fidelity, which also means that the citizen critics present themselves as much more invested in the literature than are professional film critics. Clearly, there is bound to be a more filmcentric focus in the professional film critics’ reviews, but since they are the paid, trained professionals, there is also a general expectation that they will be more academic and more knowledgeable than the “anybodys” who can post film reviews on the Internet. And yet, while most of the professionals certainly do offer descriptive, thoughtful

reviews, the citizen critics do, too, and they do so with considerably more focus on the literature that inspired the adaptation.

But the citizen critics do not limit themselves only to Austen references, as several of them exhibit their familiarity with Victorian literature in general; a number of reviewers make references to the Brontës' work and to Gothic novels, and IMDb reviewer "James Hitchcock" unfavorably characterizes Matthew MacFayden's portrayal of Darcy as "an improbably Byronic figure, more reminiscent of a Heathcliff or Mr. Rochester come straight from the windswept moors than of an Austen hero" (9/27/2005). In her article "Historical Picturesque: Adapting *Great Expectations* and *Sense and Sensibility*," Susan Johnston writes, "Adaptation seeks to re-invest the cultural capital accrued by the original in its new, mass-culture product and, by inviting recall, rewards and privileges the knowledge that recollects the source" (5). Perhaps citizen critics more often "recall" and "recollect" the original literature in their reviews because doing so "rewards and privileges [their] knowledge" and makes them feel as though they are accruing more cultural capital by showcasing their literary knowledge—something that professional critics, with the cultural capital accrued by their established positions and often well-known names, rarely feel the need to do.

However, although the professional and nonprofessional reviewers of Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* differ in regards to their reviews' literary bents, they do converge on other issues, such as the ways in which the inherent differences of literature and film

affect adaptation practices. Citizen critic “Chris Knipp” contends, “you can’t really make a movie of Jane Austen.” Chris Knipp explains:

[Austen’s] books are easily visualized on film. Movie makers can come up with the costumes and the sets. But her books aren’t essentially visual. They are meant to be read. They’re all about prose style, and the turns of phrase that make one think, sentences that flow gently and come down easy, catching you unawares so you may have to read them again, sentences that delineate the development of character through thought and experience with infinite clarity and subtlety. On screen, that development is...visual. It just happens. [...] But in Jane Austen it happens with words. Ultimately that isn’t cinematic. So you can’t make a Jane Austen movie without taking out the Jane Austen. (12/6/2005)

In these comments, Knipp argues that Austen’s work cannot be effectively transferred to the screen, as doing so causes an inevitable loss of her words and technique, which are what trademark her work as so definitively hers. Although IMDb reviewer Seraph_sister is not as pessimistic in this regard as is Chris Knipp, she also implies that filmic methods might be inadequately equipped to aptly communicate a classic novel: “You can’t lose Jane Austen’s technique, leaving only the bare bones of the story, and expect the themes to remain. Not even when you replace her techniques with your own heavy-handed mystical-ruminous fauxbrow cinematography.” While it is not entirely clear what she means by “mystical-ruminous fauxbrow,” it is clear that Seraph_sister considers the

film's efforts to adequately communicate the nuances of Austen's novel unsuccessful, instead suggesting that the differences in media may always hamper the novel-to-film adaptation process. Those differences in media are in part precisely why academics and many professional film critics find fault with fidelity discourse; creating a filmic adaptation of a literary work must involve changes, as there are simply inherent, unavoidable differences between creating a work meant to be read and creating a work designed to be seen and heard. In "Word to Image: The Problem of the Filmed Novel," film studies pioneer George Bluestone explains that because the "new medium" of film "demands" and requires changes, "it becomes all but impossible to effect a 'faithful' rendition" of a novel (178-9). Bluestone indicates that the different capabilities and techniques of the two forms of media make a completely faithful film adaptation unattainable—such a feat could only be accomplished if one were to film someone reading a novel aloud.

Bluestone finds a compatriot in Stanley Kauffman, who has been reviewing films for *The New Republic* since 1958; in his review of Wright's *Pride & Prejudice*, Kauffman addresses the fidelity discourse debate, and like present-day film scholars Robert Stam and Brian MacFarlane, Kauffman dismisses the usefulness of fidelity-based criticism with a quick wave of his review-writing hand:

To tick off the differences between a famous novel and a screen version of it is an ultimately barren business. Anyone who expects a film to reproduce the novel in its entirety, even in miniature, has been stored cryonically for a century. What we can hope for is not complete

reproduction but the creation by other means of the book's atmosphere and purpose. (par. 2)

With his caustic remark that anyone who wants a film to replicate a novel "in its entirety" has been "cryonically" preserved for 100 years, Kauffman clearly situates fidelity-based criticism as a dinosaur, an outdated method that is "barren" rather than productive in any significant sense. Instead, Kauffman recognizes the media differences between film and novels when he says that we can hope for a film to create "the book's atmosphere and purpose"⁶ through the use of "other means," techniques and methods unique to film such as cinematography, sound, editing, and mise-en-scène. And although Kauffman resists comparing film adaptations and their novelistic source texts, he has no qualms about engaging in another kind of comparative evaluation, arguing that "it is more to the point to compare this new film with a predecessor" (par. 2). He notes that Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* is "free of the studio air" that clings to the only other big-screen traditional adaptation of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to date, MGM's 1940 production starring Garson and Olivier (par. 2). And Kauffman is not alone in his tendency to reference other *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations: other professional critics whose reviews of Wright's film make mention of or comparisons to previous film versions of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* include *Rolling Stone*'s Peter Travers, Stephen Hunter of *The Washington Post*, Ken Tucker of *New York Magazine*, Peter Rainer of *The Christian Science Monitor*, Stephanie Zacharek in *Salon*, and Stephen Holden in *The New York Times*.

⁶ The terms "atmosphere and purpose" are knotty here, as Kauffman situates them as objective qualities that can be universally identified rather than the rather subjective qualities that they actually are, a move that is akin to all of the citizen critics who argue about whether an adaptation has captured the "essence" or "spirit" of a novel.

However, the citizen reviews of *Pride & Prejudice* exhibit an even more pronounced tendency to cite one particular filmic adaptation of Austen's novel in their comments, specifically Simon Langton's miniseries adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, which was first aired by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1995. In the sample of positive reviews that I explored for this chapter, many of them refer to the miniseries at some point, usually to acknowledge the quality of Langton's adaptation but also to indicate that Wright's film either equaled or surpassed that version. For instance, "Noralee" writes, "Much as I loved the BBC's mini-series of the last decade," screenwriter Moggach and director Wright "have shot the story through with adrenaline," with the end result that the film "ebulliently brings [the timelessness of the story] to life" (11/14/2005).

However, the comparisons made by the reviewers who dislike Wright's film are even more noticeable; in the sample of negative reviews, over 80 percent of them compare Wright's film with Langton's miniseries, with Wright's film consistently proclaimed the inferior adaptation. The review by "Seraph_sister," which I quote at length above, ends by offering the 1995 miniseries as a decidedly better alternative to Wright's film: "Just get the BBC adaptation on DVD and save yourself the heartache." IMDb user "Lovebeetree" writes, "I was expecting something as wonderful as the A&E⁷ version, and received a poorly acted piece of trash," and she also advises readers to "rent the A&E version" if they really want to "enjoy" the true *Pride and Prejudice*. "Lisa" from the United Kingdom asks, "Why did they have to do it again?!", with "it" referring to the "brilliant novel" that has already "had a fantastic film made from it already"—"the

⁷ Langton's miniseries premiered in the United Kingdom on BBC but was shown widely in the United States on cable channel A&E; thus, reviewers attribute Langton's miniseries to both networks.

one made by the BBC” (9/16/2005). “Me-687” from the United Kingdom writes, “The BBC version is so superior [to Wright’s adaptation] it’s not even funny and everything about this version is an insult to its memory,” a comment that not only privileges Langton’s adaptation over Wright’s but also infuses the BBC film with its own aura, giving it an authenticity with such palpable presence that it is possible to damage the “memory” of the adaptation, not just of the novel.

Other respondents also give the 1995 BBC adaptation a legacy and authority all its own, so much so that many reviewers not only revere Langton’s miniseries far above Wright’s film but also venerate the miniseries as much as they do Austen’s novel. “Me-687” finishes the review by recommending that “if you must see” Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice*, be sure “you have read the book first or seen the BBC version”; otherwise, “you will be lead [sic] down the deluded road that this is what it’s like, which its [sic] not!” According to Me-687, there are two ways to determine what Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is really like: one can either read the original novel or watch the ultra-faithful, six-hour miniseries, either of which will apparently keep you from being “deluded” about what constitutes a true rendering of *Pride and Prejudice*. “Ferrerogrll” says that watching Wright’s adaptation will be a “nasty surprise” if you “have read the book or seen the 1995 BBC version (and liked them),” and “Carole-wilbraham” contends “you may like this film” but only if “you have never read the book, have never seen the BBC adaptations and are in the mood for something chick-flicky” (10/3/2005). Both “Ferrerogrll” and “Carole-wilbraham” indicate that viewers may enjoy Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice* only if they have no prior association with *either* the book or the BBC adaptation and thus lack a “superior” with which to compare Wright’s film. Also, the

final statement of “Mkazmierczak” in her review of *Pride & Prejudice* reads, “True fans of Austen will rush home to watch their DVDs of the far superior 1995 BBC production with Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth or to read Austen’s text in order to wipe this version from their minds.” Again, the structure in this comment is particularly revealing, as the reviewer states that true Austen devotees will *either* go watch the BBC miniseries *or* read the novel in order to “wipe” the stain of Wright’s film from their minds; the use of “or” as the conjunction which connects the two options situates them as equally authentic texts—one can simply make a choice about which “original” to return to.

Such statements, which equate the novel’s authenticity with that of one of its filmic adaptations, reveal a pervasive notion that runs throughout the reviews of Joe Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice*: that when it comes to recreating and conceptualizing the Victorian Age, there are a number of texts that can “assume the aura of originals,” to use Jennifer Green-Lewis’ phrasing. In the case of *Pride & Prejudice*, Austen’s novel certainly has primary authority and is regarded by reviewers as the foremost source of authenticity, written, as it was, at a time not long removed from the period depicted in the novel. Some reviewers thus employ the typical *modus operandi* of traditional fidelity discourse and compare the film to the novel as a means of evaluating the film’s worth; for some, the novel remains far superior, but others laud the film for its ability to recreate the world Austen depicts in her novel. But the reviews also indicate that film adaptations can also “assume the aura of originals” in the minds of viewers. We express nostalgic desire for Victorian film adaptations to produce “authentic” renderings of the period so that we can more accurately construct our own perceptions of the Victorian Age. After all, it is difficult enough for us to develop a definitive idea of whom the Victorians were and what

it would have been like to live “back then,” and so we rely heavily on visual representations to show us what we can never know for ourselves. Green-Lewis argues that we use Victorian photographs, with their freeze-frame captures of a long-gone time and of people who actually lived during that time, as “sites and sources of authenticity” when we envision the nineteenth century (32). But these reviews indicate that we also expect and want films to function as Victorian “sites and sources of authenticity,” too; like photographs, films are intensely visual, and so our inclination to construct the Victorian age aesthetically rather than historically pushes us to rely on accessible visual representations. Essentially, as Garrett Stewart notes, “cinema builds on photography to perfect its own version of H.G. Wells’ time machine” (229), and so, we often watch film adaptations of Victorian novels with the expectation that the experience will be like taking a trip back in time.

Those expectations manifest themselves in the reviews of Wright’s *Pride & Prejudice*, as reviewers express great joy, tremendous disappointment, or emotions somewhere between the two extremes at the film’s ability to “do justice” to Austen’s novel and its portrayal of the Victorian Age. But the reviews in which the respondents equate the BBC’s miniseries *Pride and Prejudice* with Austen’s novel are even stronger representations of the degree to which a film can assume the authenticity of an original. For some reviewers, the BBC version rivals the authenticity of the novel because it is six hours long and thus has more “space” into which it can fit the bulk of Austen’s tome. Also, a miniseries shown over a period of several nights echoes how Victorians read their novels—the books were often serialized and offered only portions of the story at one time, a method mirrored by Masterpiece Theatre’s sectioning of its lengthy *Pride and*

Prejudice into a several-nights event. As Greg M. Smith ventures in *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, a “miniseries adaptation” of a novel, in which the stories are “parceled out over separate nights,” creates a viewing experience that “might be more like reading a chapter a night in [a] novel” than like trying to read a book in just one sitting (145).

But the miniseries’ length and novel-esque structure are not the only factors that contribute to its elevated authority in the reviews. As George Bluestone notes, when a film “is considered ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than the novel, the comparison, strictly speaking, is made between that film and *other films*” (175). It is rather complicated and difficult to make specific comparisons between the two dissimilar “genera” of film and novels, and so Bluestone argues that actually, we are more apt to measure a film adaptation’s success by comparing it to other adaptations, which is what Kauffman and many citizen critics do in their reviews. Also, if we revisit Green-Lewis’ idea about our contemporary society’s *visual* conceptualization of the Victorian Age, Bluestone’s assertion makes even more sense, as it is plausible that the BBC miniseries acquires such an immense degree or authenticity in the eyes of the viewers because it is one of the few “visualizations” (i.e., film or television adaptations) of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* that exist. Plus, it is likely that most reviewers have never seen a film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* other than the BBC miniseries, as the 1940 MGM production is less available and has the disadvantage of never having been widely shown on television; as a consequence, Langton’s version is the one with which viewers are most familiar and thus, serves as their best means of comparison.

However, simply *being* one of the few film adaptations of a classic novel does not seem like it should guarantee the adaptation an automatic air of authenticity, and certainly not one that at times rivals the aura of the novel itself. But perhaps the 1995 filmic adaptation trumps the 2005 adaptation in many reviews because it is viewed by filmgoers as being the more nostalgic of the two adaptations; in its detailed replication of Austen's novel, from major plot points to minutiae, the miniseries expresses a steadfast dedication to and desire for the period portrayed in Austen's novel, and to many reviewers, that desire seems markedly more aligned with the novel's intent than does Wright's adaptation, as its mere 121-minute length requires that some parts be "left out." As Brian McFarlane notes in "Something Old, Something New: *Pride and Prejudice* on Screen," the 1995 miniseries "follows the book with the assiduity of someone painting by numbers" (10), and so the reviewers who rail against Wright's film seem to think that vigorous fidelity is the most effective manner of "being true" to Jane Austen—the numerous comments that call the miniseries "more historically accurate" or "more detailed" than Wright's film show that many viewers prefer as much authenticity as they can get. After all, our contemporary culture pushes us to "fall in love" with the past, as evidenced by recent Heritage movements, the prevalence of retro throwback uniforms and stadiums in the sports world, the consistently profitable business of antiques, and the popularity of stores like Restoration Hardware that deal in "faux antiques." David Lowenthal describes the past as "a foreign country with a booming tourist trade" (qtd. in Johnston 167), and as our part of that tourist trade, our culture also produces innumerable media products that attempt to replicate or evoke the past. Fred Davis suggests, "media products may now serve memory where once houses, streets, and persons did" (128), and

we have come to rely on those media representations for their ability to create the past and make it memorable.

And so, the reviewers who react more favorably to Langton's lengthy adaptation seem to be looking for the media product that best creates an authentic past and most thoroughly "serves" their "memories." Since the BBC has a long-running tradition of paying fastidious attention to detail and historical accuracy, from sweeping landscapes to proper pillow fringe, the *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries provides its viewers with "more" to rely on as they construct their conceptions of the Victorian period—and also arouses more nostalgia in its viewers. For the viewers who react favorably to Wright's *Pride & Prejudice*, his film adequately serves their memories, providing suitable satisfaction for the viewers' nostalgic yearning. But few viewers express opinions that render both Wright's film and Langton's miniseries as equally "good," for as Stuart Tannock notes in "Nostalgia Critique," nostalgia "approaches the past as a stable source of meaning and value" (455). In order for a film to present a "stable" portrayal of a past period, then, it cannot be contradicted or challenged by another portrayal. As such, the adaptation that a reviewer considers the most detailed and the most "true" becomes the most stable and the most authentic—it becomes that viewer's primary site of authority for the "visible nineteenth century" (Green-Lewis 31).

In the chapter that follows, I discuss a film adaptation that devotes a great deal of effort to creating a "visible nineteenth century": Roman Polanski's *Oliver Twist* (2005). Like *Pride & Prejudice*, the film is a faithful adaptation that tries to accurately evoke the Victorian past as it tells Charles Dickens' memorable story. The film's meticulous recreation of nineteenth-century London provokes a great deal of fidelity-laden reviews,

reviews that are even more nostalgic and more ardent about period authenticity than are the *Pride & Prejudice* reviews. But my discussion of Polanski's *Oliver Twist* also explores what happens when the filmgoers' desire for authenticity and faithfulness is challenged by a competing need: to see evidence that the film is not just another adaptation of Dickens' novel but rather *Polanski's* adaptation of Dickens' novel. The reviews of *Oliver Twist* show how adaptation discourse is complicated when the reviewers' desire to see the source's author inscribed in the film competes with an equally strong desire to see evidence of the auteur in the film as well.

Chapter 2



Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* is a well-known tale, a book with characters and themes that seem able to survive just as well outside its pages as they do within them. As Internet Movie Database reviewer "David H. Schleicher" explains, "One way or another we all [know] this story [of *Oliver Twist*], either from the book, the David Lean film version, or the iconic musical from the 1960's" (12/19/2005). But there have been numerous other incarnations of the novel as well, including several made-for-television miniseries, a *Masterpiece Theatre* version, and a Disney animated feature film; in the last-mentioned, the titular character is an abandoned orphan kitten who pals around with Dodger, a rascally, kerchief-wearing mutt with a weakness for sausages. While I have long been familiar with the story of *Oliver Twist*, I had not read Dickens' novel until one year ago; ultimately, most people know the tale of good-hearted orphan boy Oliver Twist even if they have never read the novel from whence the tale came. The combination of *Oliver Twist*'s prominence in popular culture and its status as a beloved canonical "classic" make adapting the novel a daunting task for most filmmakers. Directors and screenwriters who adapt *Oliver Twist* for the cinema are expected to create films that not only "do justice" to the original novel's quality but also somehow "match" the many ways in which the story has previously been adapted—and the many ways in which the public remembers or has become familiar with the story.

And so, it is not surprising that the release of the 2005 film *Oliver Twist*, the first feature film version of *Oliver Twist* since Carol Reed's 1968 musical, was saddled with tremendous expectations, but those expectations were even greater because of the director

attached to the film: 72-year-old Roman Polanski. Polanski, best known for directing *Repulsion* (1965), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Chinatown* (1974), *Tess* (1979), and *The Pianist* (2002), is an auteur whose work is characterized by its dark and gritty subject matter and is often described by critics as violent, sinister, bizarre, and disturbing, among other adjectives (Harmetz C19). In *Variety*, Todd McCarthy remarks that Polanski's films are known for their "dramatic urgency and intriguing undercurrents" (62), and Harlan Kennedy states that Polanski is "a director noted for his surreal, macabre, and absurdist touch" (qtd. in Fox 2). Critics have long explained Polanski's filmic obsession with cruelty and violence by citing his own troubled life, including the murder of his pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, at the hands of the Manson family. When Polanski signed on to direct *Oliver Twist*, his autobiography seemed even more likely to affect his interpretation of Dickens' tale of a fragile orphan: Polanski is a Polish Jew who spent most of his childhood in flight and hiding from the Nazis; his parents were shipped to concentration camps, and his mother eventually died at Auschwitz (Scott E6). And so, because of Polanski's reputation, filmography, and traumatic personal history, most viewers expected *Oliver Twist* to be not just another filmic adaptation of a familiar Dickensian tale but rather a *Polanski* film of a Dickens' novel. This specific and weighty designation created two distinct sets of viewer expectations that are evident in the reviews of the film: viewers expected the film to be true to Dickens in its core but also wanted the film to be unquestionably Polanski's, imbued with the same sort of sinister soul and dark "dramatic urgency" that characterize his other films.

But what the reviews reveal is that these two expectations, instead of coexisting peacefully, become competing prescriptions for what this recent adaptation of *Oliver*

Twist needed to accomplish in order to win the reviewers' favor. If both expectations are deemed to have been adequately met—if the film seems sufficiently Dickensian and yet also decidedly Polanski-esque—then reviews are generally favorable. However, when a citizen critic thinks that one of the two major obligations went unfulfilled, the reviews tend to be resoundingly negative and steeped in disappointment. IMDb user “Shakira Edghill” from the United Kingdom expresses frustration with Polanski's film in her review: “Roman Polanski has let himself down this time. He is undoubtedly an amazing director, but this film looks like something he threw together overnight” (10/22/2005). Shakira Edghill then makes an unfavorable comparison between Polanski's *Oliver Twist* and Carol Reed's 1968 musical version—“it honestly is the musical without the songs”—and ends with a piece of advice: “In all sincerity, read the book, because Dickens' version is and always will be the best.” Polanski's reputation as an “amazing director” precedes him, and Edghill, for one, expected more visionary filmmaking from him—but she also reveals that no film adaptation can “match” Dickens' “version,” which will always remain the best. Also, Edghill's telling use of the word “version” to describe the original novel makes the story of *Oliver Twist* seem almost archetypal; the story exists on its own terms, and every *Oliver Twist*, be it a film, book, or some other pop culture permutation, is a rendering of it, including the novel that initially produced the tale.

Like “Shakira Edghill,” IMDb reviewer “Philconcannon” is disappointed by Polanski's film. Philconcannon offers a thorough eight-paragraph review of Polanski's *Oliver Twist* in which he articulately discusses a number of related topics, including the film's pacing and cinematography, the actors' performances, and the progression of the plot. But this reviewer's 4-stars-out-of-10 assessment of *Oliver Twist* dwells longest on

the film's noticeable lack of the Polanski "touch." Philconcannon's hopeful expectations for the pairing of Polanski and Dickens' novel were high; he writes, "Charles Dickens' classic tale, which features a young boy being endlessly abused by a rogue's gallery of grotesques, could have been a perfect fit for a filmmaker whose fascinating career has been marked by a taste for the macabre" (10/10/2005). But for Philconcannon, the pairing of director and classic tale is far from a "perfect fit," as Polanski fails to imbue the film with his trademark disturbing and absurdist sensibility. His review exposes the two-pronged high expectations that viewers often have when watching a well-known director's filmic adaptation of a literary classic:

It's always interesting when a filmmaker of Polanski's stature takes on a revered work of literature, particularly one which has been adapted so often, and Polanski's track record inspires confidence (remember his full-blooded take on 'Macbeth') but this effort is desperately underwhelming. We look forward to the story's signature set-pieces, to see what new twist (excuse the pun) Polanski can bring to them, but time and time again we are disappointed.

Philconcannon ends his review by continuing to lament "what could have been" if only Polanski had created the film with more of his signature style, and in doing so, he again references Polanski's adaptation of *Macbeth*, a "dark and twisted tale" that Philconcannon believes "contains everything [*Oliver Twist*] lacks: passion, intensity, and the director's personality seeping through every frame." In this reviewer's opinion, Polanski's *Oliver Twist* "seems like it was made on autopilot and – this is something I

never thought I'd say about a Roman Polanski picture – it feels like it could have been directed by anybody.”

Philconcannon's reaction to *Oliver Twist* is so colored by his expectations of Polanski's status as an auteur and the darkly fantastic nature of Polanski's previous films that he cannot offer the film a wholly positive review when those expectations are not met. In fact, Philconcannon praises a number of the film's elements: he calls the cinematography “rich” and the production design “superb,” and he cites many of the actors for their strong performances. But because this film lacks the “passion, intensity, and [trademark] personality” of Polanski's previous films—and ends up feeling as though it were just another film that “could have been directed by anybody”—Philconcannon feels let down. Such disappointment stems from his view of Polanski as an auteur; in David Gestner's “The Practices of Authorship,” Gestner describes the auteur, borrowing from the theories of Peter Wollen:

Auteur theory investigates the ‘stylistic expressions’ of the filmmaker similar to the way one considers a musician's interpretation of a score or a commission charged to a painter. The material may originate from several hands...but the artist's interpretation is a transformation of the ‘original’ score or, in the case of film, screenplay. (10)

In the comments of Philconcannon, he clearly expresses a desire for Polanski to transform the material he has to work with—both the screenplay and Dickens' novel—and imbue it with his distinctive “‘stylistic impression,’” just as a painter or musician would do. Although the reviewer implies that a certain degree of fidelity is necessary in the making of the film, as he mentions the novel's “signature set-pieces,” his response

indicates that the true author of this film does not have to be Dickens; he only gives Dickens a few offhand mentions, and never insinuates that there needed to be more Dickens in the film. Instead, Philconcannon's opinion implies that it was up to Polanski to "author" this film, and when Polanski fails to live up to his potential, the remaining authorial stamp of Dickens is not enough to make the adaptation successful.

Other reviews also illustrate that expectations about authorial intention in *Oliver Twist* led to similar disappointments. "Brocksilvey" explains why some filmgoers will enjoy the film and why others will be unimpressed, and his comments also show that he expects both "authors" to assert their presences in the film:

If you love *Oliver Twist* and want nothing more than a very straightforward retelling of the Dickens classic, you will be well served by this movie. If, however, you approach this because you're interested in what one of cinema's most interesting and accomplished directors will do with the subject matter, you may be just as disappointed, as I was. This is a faithful but uninspired, and ultimately unnecessary, version of the story.
(12/19/2005)

Brocksilvey's comments illustrate a paradoxical element of fidelity discourse: while he admits that the film is faithful to the original novel, a trait that most reviewers cling to as an important criterion for an adaptation's worth, he wanted Polanski to do something more with his source material—to enhance it in some way so that the story becomes not only Dickens' but also Polanski's. Brocksilvey wants the authors to co-own the film, and so it seems likely that he would have been similarly disappointed had Polanski changed too much of Dickens' story. Throughout his review, Brocksilvey's comments are

somewhat contradictory; he calls Polanski's film "faithful" but elsewhere says that the film fails to please because of its "tepid storytelling," and he criticizes Polanski for removing "so many of the elements that make Dickens' stories so engaging," including the memorable characters whom Polanski causes to "fade into the background." Brocksilvey's wavering seems indicative of his own struggle to reconcile the roles he wanted the film's two authors to play in the making of the movie.

Another reviewer, "Tom May," also bemoans what is lost in Polanski's adaptation and yearns for a unique Polanski "take" on the film. He declares, "Dickens' cherishable verbosity is maintained, but much of his inherent liveliness – and theatricality – is skimmed over, or lost entirely" (11/6/2005). Tom May is not as much concerned with the more obvious and tangible elements that the film cuts from the novel—e.g., the characters of Monks and Rose, the familial coincidences, Mrs. Bumble—but is instead concerned with the loss of the film's general spirit and aura, its "liveliness" and "theatricality." Interestingly, Tom May employs a reading metaphor—"skimmed over"—to describe what the film has lost; ironically, that loss includes the novel's "theatricality," a trait most assume would be amplified rather than diminished in the move from page to screen. Tom May believes Polanski played it safe with this adaptation and should have instead "gone hell for leather" and "tapped into the real unease" that he had infused into his previous films. For Tom May, Polanski had two responsibilities: to help the film retain the authentic feel of the original novel and to create an adaptation with a discernible aura of its own, one that could only have been created by Polanski. Also bothered by a somewhat indescribable but still palpable "lack"

in the film is reviewer “Harry T. Yung,” who expresses his overall reaction to Polanski’s *Oliver Twist*:

Polanski meticulously recreated the gloomy world of Dickens’ times, lest we forget. All the Dickens elements are faithfully and artfully presented – the caricature-like characters, the all-goodness benefactor, the glimpse [of] hope in a harsh world of reality. The cinematography is simply heartbreakingly beautiful, looking often like exquisite paintings. Acting is seasoned and professional. A classic among classics is brought to the screen again, by a great master. It makes one feel almost embarrassed to complain, and yet, there is that small voice inside that keeps whispering “Is that all? Should there be more?” (11/22/2005)

What Harry T. Yung and numerous other reviewers highlight is that even when a film adaptation is viewed as remaining faithful to the source novel, the film can still falter, particularly when other expectations—such as assuming a “great master” director will somehow change but not bastardize a “classic”—are not met. In the comments above, Yung is candid when he admits that Polanski’s film seems to be a great whole of its well-made parts, and yet he’s “almost embarrassed” that he senses a void in the film; for Yung, the film is missing the compelling originality that a faithful Victorian film adaptation directed by a visionary auteur like Polanski should assume.

In a sense, the reviewers who are let down by what they see as the film’s lack of decidedly Polanski overtones are experiencing a sort of directorial nostalgia—a yearning for Polanski’s past and for their own past experiences of watching Polanski’s previous films. As Fred Davis points out, in our modern society, “almost anything from our past

can emerge as an object of nostalgia, provided that we can somehow view it in a pleasant light” (viii). And while the films of Polanski do not create nostalgia in the traditional, fuzzy-feeling sense, they are nostalgic in that they are remembered by film reviewers in a “pleasant light,” as creations indicative of a past—Polanski’s dark, unsettling auteur verve, representative of the now-extinct era of New American Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s—that has been supplanted by a less attractive present: a straightforward filmic retelling of a classic novel that bears little resemblance to Polanski’s macabre filmic stylings of his earlier years.

But nostalgia does not emerge in the reviews of Polanski’s *Oliver Twist* only when the critics yearn for the Polanski of yore. In fact, the reviewers express nostalgia for nineteenth-century England and all its associated charm and liveliness (and, sometimes, its griminess and gloom) with incredible frequency. Strikingly, although none of the reviewers have personally experienced what it would have been like to live in Dickensian England, those who do evaluate the film’s replication of the time period do so with utmost certainty, and they do so with a decidedly nostalgic air, talking about the details and images that Polanski “gets right” or “gets wrong.” And so, I suggest that many reviews which at first glance seem like traditional fidelity-based critiques are actually more nostalgic in nature, as the reviewers are not as much concerned with the transfer of details and characters from the novel to film as they are with the appropriate recreation of Victorian England in the film. Even the official press for the film declares that Polanski decided that “London itself would have to be a major character” in order for the film to “stand out” (“Building *Oliver Twist*”). And so, just as viewers regard Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* as a definitive depiction of the Regency era and want its

film adaptations to fulfill a similar role, Dickens' *Oliver Twist* functions as a nostalgic artifact of Victorian England. Consequently, its subsequent adaptations are expected to do the same, perhaps to an even greater degree because of film's predominantly visual nature; after all, as Jennifer Green-Lewis reminds us, we conceive the Victorian period aesthetically and are always looking to the "visible nineteenth century" to help us recall and reconstruct the era (31).

Fred Davis lends support to the notion of a film's ability to authenticate the past in his discussion of the mass media's influence on nostalgia. Davis contends that "the landscape of collective nostalgia" is now "inhabited increasingly and perhaps even predominantly by media creations, personalities, and allusions" (125), meaning that the "things" that have nostalgic status for us are mainly creations of the media, or at least elements somehow "filtered" through the media: hearing Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats on the radio, seeing the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, listening to an Elvis song on a record player. But the mass media not only creates the objects of nostalgia but also propagates nostalgic yearning; Davis examines the media's extensive recreation of small-town American life at the turn of the century, and he argues that even though we may not have lived during the so-called "age of innocence," now "we feel—because of the movies we have seen, the stories we have read, the radio serials we've listened to—'as if we had.'" This "created, secondhand reality" thus achieves practically "the same nostalgic status as something experienced firsthand in our very own lives" (121).

And so it is with the reviews of Polanski's *Oliver Twist*: the reviewers want the film, which is a largely faithful adaptation of the novel, to make them feel "as if they had" experienced the Victorian Age firsthand. The implicit irony in this desire is that

somehow, from some other source, these reviewers have developed a notion of what the Victorian Age really was like; they cannot judge the authenticity of a film's recreation of it if they did not purport to know what it truly was like. Whether they developed their "visible nineteenth centuries" from a novel like *Oliver Twist* or from some other source, many evaluators of Polanski's *Oliver Twist* communicate that they regard the film's ability to thoroughly represent nineteenth-century Dickensian England as crucial in determining its worth. The Internet Movie Database reviewers of Polanski's *Oliver Twist* make it clear that they have precise conceptions of what it means to accurately render nineteenth-century London, and their standards encompass everything from the griminess of the narrow alleyways to the splendor and sanctuary of Mr. Brownlow's estate. In their comments, their nostalgia for the Victorian era emerges in two primary ways: they either gush over Polanski's eye for accurate detail and authenticity or they scold him for prettifying the scenes and thus falsifying the story and setting. Both tendencies show that these reviewers assume knowledge of authentic Victorian England. One IMDb user, "Envinyatar2," offers a review entitled "Absolutely Perfect," identifying his favorite part of the film as "definitely the visuals." The description of the film's standout visual features dominates this review:

The set and the costume crew has [*sic*] done an amazing job of recreating the London in which Oliver lived. Every nuance of London, from the slums to the well to do [*sic*] areas has been very faithfully realized on screen. The squalor of the back alleys is almost palpable as the characters trod through the mud, and one is almost tempted to doff their [*sic*] hat when the scenery moves to the middle class homes. (10/2/2005)

In this review that feels almost like a virtual tour, “Envinyatar2” nonchalantly and unconsciously adopts a position of authority, praising *Oliver Twist* for its realism while simultaneously situating himself as one who knows precisely what the London “in which Oliver lived” looked like and someone who can even sense the intangible “nuance[s]” of nineteenth-century London. His word choice depicts the setting and the characters as independent of their novelistic origins, as though there truly is a “London in which Oliver lived” that warrants accurate portrayal, not just the fictionalized London described by Dickens in the novel.

In another positive review of *Oliver Twist*, “Andreas Niedermayer” calls Polanski’s film a “visual revelation” and rates it “a solid 8” out of ten (2/2/2006). After a lengthy paragraph in which he discusses the actors’ performances, “Niedermayer” transitions into another part of his discussion: “By leaving the characters and taking a closer look at the story itself, I have to acknowledge the visual accomplishments of Polanski’s adaptation,” but the paragraph that follows this statement of intent has very little to do with the “story itself”—it instead focuses only on the “visual accomplishments” and makes no specific references to any parts of the film’s storyline. “Andreas Niedermayer” tries to consider both the story arc and the film’s aesthetic components but instead only focuses on the visuals, implying that the authentic rendering of the story’s locale and atmosphere is equally as important as and possibly more so than the foundation of the entire plot. His comments in the paragraph pertaining to the film’s “visual accomplishments” are steeped in nostalgia:

The images of the Victorian Age are stunning, the use of light and wide-angle shots together with partly gloomy, partly colorful close-ups and the

contemporary London skyline create [sic] a visually intriguing and convincing setting that very much lives up to Dickens' perception of those days. The visuals add substantial authenticity in terms of reviving the cultural features of London and the Victorian society.

Like "Envinyatar2" and in a move common to these online reviews, Niedermayer speaks for Dickens, albeit in a more subtle way than many other reviewers who make statements that claim the authors would roll over in their graves if they had to see these films (see Chapter 1). In a sense, Niedermayer takes it upon himself to vouch for the authenticity of the film when he writes that the setting "very much lives up to Dickens' perception" of Victorian London; although he likely refers to Dickens' presentation of London in his novel, he assumes that the *presentation* of London in the novel is synonymous with the way Dickens himself *perceived* the city—and that the presentation of the city in the novel is truly reflective of what the city was really like. Niedermayer validates the film's visual components on behalf of the author, a gesture that shows Niedermayer's confidence in his ability to recognize authenticity when he sees it, and that certainty allows him to nostalgically vouch for the accuracy of the lost era depicted in the film.

But perhaps the most striking example of how nostalgia can shape the slant of a citizen critic's film review is "Charles Delacroix"'s assessment of *Oliver Twist*. In Delacroix's opinion, the movie "on the whole" is poor, hampered by "over-emphasis and melodramatic portrayal" in its screenplay, characterizations, and dialogue. But Charles Delacroix is not altogether disappointed; he writes, "and yet...what really kept me in the theatre was the sheer flavor of the times." Unlike Andreas Niedermayer and Envinyatar2, Delacroix acknowledges his amateur status—"I'm no expert on those

times”—but nonetheless enthusiastically extols the film’s recreation of nineteenth-century London:

The sights, the sounds, the squalor of London, the serenity of the countryside, the homeliness of the thatched house by the side of the road, the rain on cobblestones in the market...there were all simply to me exquisite. [In] one of the scenes toward the end...there is a mad scramble up one side and down the other side of a peaked roof tiled in shale. The look of the shale, the sounds of shale coming loose, were sheer delight: how could one not feel that one was there, that one was experiencing something that 21st century man or woman simply doesn’t have available in these times and climes...? (10/2/2005)

In his comments, Delacroix shows that his assessment of the film relies heavily on its ability to create “exquisite” scenes of 19th-century London, so much so that the successful rendering of the era trumps his lukewarm response to other major elements of the film. Delacroix’s focus on minor elements like individual shale tiles illustrates the typical nostalgic habit of focusing on exquisite details, and he also exhibits what Stuart Tannock calls the “periodizing emotion” so common to nostalgia; when Delacroix asserts that watching the film’s authentic recreation of the chase scene on the shale roof is an experience that “21st century man or woman simply doesn’t have available” in this day and age, he clearly periodizes his response to the film with a definite division of “that was then, this is now” (Tannock 456). Of course, the “then” is preferable to the “now.” For “Delacroix,” his positive reaction to the film is fueled by his sense that it accurately captures a world that is completely unfamiliar and out of our reach today. Even with its

“squalor” and “homeliness,” nineteenth-century London is engrossing and exquisite in the film because it is so different and so far removed from our 21st-century lives. The contrast between the two eras feeds Delacroix’s nostalgic response, for as Fred Davis asserts in *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, nostalgia acquires its significance from “the particular way we juxtapose it to certain features of our present lives” (13). So, because the sights and sounds of nineteenth-century London stand so sharply in contrast to the sights and sounds of our 21st-century world, the nostalgia for the lost period and all it had to offer brings Delacroix the “sheer delight” that determines the outcome of his review.

However, not all citizen critics respond to Polanski’s *Oliver Twist* with such nostalgic adoration. Some reviewers’ assessments of the film are negative because they feel that Polanski has fallen prey to the saccharine power of nostalgia. But ironically, while they criticize Polanski and his film for nostalgically prettifying “true” Victorian London, they also exhibit a sense of nostalgia themselves, as their critiques indicate that there is a stable and authentic representation of Victorian England that the film could have and should have depicted—and that representations needed to be appropriately dark and dirty. As Paula Rabinowitz notes, “Nostalgia can take many forms, including the yearning for a wretched past, a past comprised of dirt and squalor and people whose struggle for survival becomes, in our hands, the stuff of dreams and envy” (17). A review posted by IMDb user “Brendangcarroll” shows his yearning for the wretched past of Victorian London. He begins by stating that Polanski is “totally wide of the mark in interpreting Dickens and recreating 19th century London,” a telling remark with a conjunctive structure that equates the overall task of the film—“interpreting Dickens”—

with what would normally be one of the film's many stylistic elements: "recreating 19th century London" (1/9/2006). But like "Andreas Niedermayer," Brendangcarroll's review focuses most intently on the film's problematic interpretation of the period rather than its interpretation of Dickens' novel:

So much is wrong with the film stylistically. [...] 19th century London was a filthy place, largely because adequate sewerage & street cleaning were not in place until the late 1890s. The place stank, and so did the people. Who researched the period for Polanski? They should return their fee forthwith! [...] It wasn't only the slums which were wrong. Brownlow's house looked like it had been erected in 2004 so clean & new was the brickwork, whereas it should have been a late Regency period dwelling. So much was artificial....

In his comments, citizen critic Brendangcarroll accuses Polanski and those involved with the film of nostalgic filmmaking—of recreating a London that is cleaner and more pleasant than it actually had been. But this reviewer's quibbling also shows that he himself holds fast to a certain perception of what the slums, the streets, and the houses of Victorian London should look (and smell) like, as he yearns for the past that he deems most real.

In an even harsher review, IMDb critic "Laurence Schwartz" charges Polanski with creating a film stripped of its "moral ambiguity" and "dark comedy" and instead making a Disney-fied version of Dickens' story that is suitable for children, an apparently unimaginable and unforgivable offense coming from a gritty director like Polanski. For Laurence Schwartz, the major failure of the film is its too-clean, too-nice rendering of a

dark-hearted story. His review, entitled “Dickensian Gloss,” exhibits strains of fidelity discourse—his end sentence advises children to read the novel if they want to “taste Dickens undiluted”—and it also criticizes Polanski’s misleading nostalgic rendering of many of the film’s scenes: “When young Oliver Twist makes his journey through England’s countryside to London, I thought to myself what a lovely trip young Oliver is taking. How lush the scenery and how rich the sky. Nowhere in the film was I able to glean what hunger and exhaustion felt like, as I am whenever I view David Lean’s definitive adaptation” (10/2/2005). Schwartz argues that the “lovely trip” Oliver takes in the film while trekking to London is not authentically rendered, as it is void of the “exhaustion and hunger” that are supposed to define it. Schwartz also makes an evaluative move that is typical of many IMDb reviews: he references another adaptation, David Lean’s 1948 film *Oliver Twist*, and compares it to Polanski’s film; he cites another filmic adaptation as the “standard” against which to measure other adaptations.

Schwartz’s gesture returns us to Fred Davis’ discussion of the mass media’s influence on nostalgia in *Yearning for Yesterday*. Since our “landscape of collective nostalgia” is becoming increasingly filled with media creations, it is only natural that films—particularly films that portray a time period like the Victorian Age, for which there already exists a great deal of nostalgic yearning—have come to assume the authority of authenticity in the minds of many viewers. And although Davis believes we are not slaves to “every whim and fancy” of mass media, he articulates that “a great deal more of what we think, feel, and believe—our innermost images of the world around us and its happenings—originates with the media and is, moreover, processed and defined by them” (127). And so, if many of our perceptions and beliefs originate from the media,

then the reactions of IMDb reviewers to Polanski's *Oliver Twist* are remarkable for what they reveal about the roles nostalgia and the desire for authenticity play in our judgments of media products. We cannot experience the Victorian era firsthand. It simply isn't possible. As a result, we look for the next best thing to help us experience the era, some sort of artifact or creation that assumes an "aura of authenticity." For Jennifer Green-Lewis, the "next best thing" are the images in Victorian-era photographs, but for much of the public, the sights and sounds of Victorian novel film adaptations are as close to the "original" as they can get and thus assume their own definitive authority.

In the chapter that follows, I examine a film that differs from both *Oliver Twist* and *Pride & Prejudice* because it does not attempt to create a "visible nineteenth century," nor does it purport to be a faithful adaptation of its original source. Instead, Alfonso Cuarón's *Great Expectations* (1998) lifts Dickens' tale out of the nineteenth century and thoroughly modernizes it. *Great Expectations* does not try to be what Stuart Tannock calls a "stable source of meaning and value" (455) for the Victorian Age but instead creates an original context for the structure, themes, and characters of Dickens' novel, a move that inspires a slew of fascinating responses that reveal what happens when a modernization disrupts the traditional stability of Victorian novel film adaptations.

Chapter 3



Unlike the fairly faithful approaches of *Pride & Prejudice* and *Oliver Twist*, Alfonso Cuarón's 1998 film *Great Expectations* takes a markedly different approach to Victorian novel adaptation. Like Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), Cuarón's *Great Expectations* is a "loose" adaptation: it appropriates the original story and structure of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and significantly changes its time period, setting, characters' names, and major plot points. Luhrmann retains the language of Shakespeare's play but transplants it into near-future Verona Beach, where the characters wield guns, zoom around in convertibles, and sport Hawaiian shirts; Heckerling updates Austen's novel *Emma* into the story of a Beverly Hills Valley Girl with penchants for shopping and matchmaking; and Cuarón turns Dickens' story of humble-means Pip trying to make his way as a gentleman in early Victorian London into the story of humble-means Finnegan "Finn" Bell trying to make his way in the 1980s New York City art world.

Obviously, Cuarón's adaptation takes major liberties with Dickens' text, and in doing so, it produces a body of responses quite distinct from the *Pride & Prejudice* and *Oliver Twist* reviews. Since the film is such a departure from the novel, some of the responses are not surprising: many outraged reviews disparage the film for wreaking havoc on Dickens' prized novel and express disappointment that Cuarón's film is so unfaithful to its source. However, given the prevalence of fidelity discourse in reviewers' assessments of Victorian novel film adaptations, as illustrated by the last two chapters, it *is* surprising that there are so many favorable reviews of this film, including some that

adamantly admonish those who insist on comparing the novel to the book. Also, many of the reviews of Cuarón's *Great Expectations* are remarkably brief and lacking in detail and explanation, a pattern which sharply contrasts with the lengthy and specific evaluations offered by the *Pride & Prejudice* and *Oliver Twist* reviewers. In this chapter, I explore how the reviewers of Alfonso Cuarón's *Great Expectations* craft their responses to a film that differs so greatly from its source; because Cuarón's film is such a loose adaptation of Dickens' novel, many citizen reviewers' standard fidelity-based critical modes become ineffectual, and they must attempt to respond to Cuarón's *Great Expectations* as a *film* rather than as an *adaptation*. In short, I suggest that Cuarón's far-from-faithful film makes it difficult for most reviewers, particularly the citizen critics, to provide thorough and thoughtful assessments of the film because it renders the familiar strains of fidelity discourse inadequate, leaving reviewers floundering for other productive types of criticism. *En masse*, the reviewers of *Great Expectations* lack authority in their judgments and often resort to vague, overemotional, or illogical comments to express their opinions about the film.

I also argue that part of the reviewers' overt displeasure with Cuarón's film stems not only from what they see as Cuarón's "butchering" of the novel but also from the film's failure to function as a site of nineteenth-century nostalgia; in their yearning for the film to be "more like" Dickens' novel, they are also yearning for the film to be a media product that visually reconstructs the Victorian era, a desire that Cuarón's contemporary filmic update does not satisfy.

Internet Movie Database reviewer “Artzau” typifies many of the filmgoers who detest Cuarón’s *Great Expectations*. In his response, Artzau immediately declares his main gripe about the film:

This is not Dickens. This is Hollywood taking a 19th century Gothic novel and turning it into a confusion. [...] In spite of a cinemagraphically [*sic*] pleasing film, they have tweaked the storyline until it becomes neither Dickens or [*sic*] a modern tale anyone besides chick-flick addicts will buy.

In a word, disappointing. Two words: Most disappointing. (3/22/2001)

Artzau’s opinion of Cuarón’s *Great Expectations* is shared by many IMDb reviewers: the film is simply too much of a departure from the original novel to be any good. The film is “most disappointing” and “a confusion” because the storyline has been “tweaked” beyond repair and turned into an unrecognizable disaster—it’s not Dickens, but it is also not “a modern tale.” Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* agrees, and he writes, “In its rush to modernize the story and attract a young audience...[Cuarón’s] film ends up problematic both in relation to the original and on its own terms” (par. 1). Unlike the many reviewers who want *Oliver Twist* to have a Polanski/Dickens double identity, these critics indicate that Cuarón’s *Great Expectations* cannot lead a double life; it must be either a modernization or a faithful representation of Dickens, but it is neither of those. The reviewers’ desire for an adaptation to establish a clear identity is not one that emerges in the reviews of *Pride & Prejudice* and *Oliver Twist*; seemingly, because Cuarón’s film has the audacity to move so far away from its source, viewers like Artzau insist that the film must function wholly by its own filmic devices rather than revert to using Dickens’ original material only when it needs help.

Like Artzau, reviewer “Obiwan-27” also prioritizes fidelity in his assessment of Cuarón’s *Great Expectations*. He starts by singing the praises of Dickens’ novel—it is “an extremely clever and engaging coming of age tale” and “one of Dickens’ best novels”—and then proceeds to criticize the film for its clumsy manhandling of the book: “This film takes the basic premise, crunches it into 90 minutes (that somehow feels like 3 hours), take [*sic*] out all the connective tissue of the subplots, and modernizes it” (8/7/2000). Here, Obiwan-27’s diction provides a glimpse of the seriousness with which reviewers perceive fidelity violations in adaptations. His use of “crunches” invites images of destruction, deformation, and recycling, and when he accuses the film of removing the “connective tissue” of the novel’s subplots, he injects the novel with bodily life and then just as quickly blames the adaptation for killing it. And although Obiwan-27 finds the film to have some redeeming features—he admits, “the cinematography is excellent”—he thinks “everything else in the movie is dreary dull and/or stupid” and finds it “impossible to comprehend how some reviewers liked this better than the book. (!!!) Maybe they didn’t understand all the big words.” Obiwan-27’s review, entitled “B@stardized Dickens,” clearly places itself within the realm of fidelity discourse; he privileges the novel so far above Cuarón’s film that he condescendingly insults the intelligence of anyone who dares to prefer the film to the book, insinuating that the limitations of their vocabulary must have impeded their reading of the novel.

Other reviewers of *Great Expectations* are similarly hostile: “Hishamzr” says that the filmmakers have “raped [Dickens’] story” and “made it as shallow as possible,” leaving only “the skeleton” (5/10/2006); IMDb user “Tufneltowers” calls the film “ghastly” and recommends watching the film only if “you like to see English art dumped

upon from a great height by arrogant Philistines” (12/29/2004); and professional critic Jonathan Rosenbaum of the *Chicago Reader* calls the film “a horrendous effort all around” in which “so little of the novel is dealt with” and yet “so much of that little is mauled” that the film makes Dickens “look like a weak second cousin to John Grisham” (par. 1). The reviewers’ use of such strong language to describe the effects of adaptation on a novel—“dumped,” “mauled,” “raped,” “bastardized”—is typical, says Robert Stam. Stam states that “the conventional language of adaptation criticism” is often “profoundly moralistic, rich in terms that imply that the cinema has somehow done a disservice to literature” (3). According to Stam, each accusatory word carries “its specific charge of opprobrium,” and the reviewers’ comments here are no exception: “dumped” implies filth and the discarding of trash; “mauled” conveys animalistic violence; “raped” implies sexual violation and violence; and “bastardized,” as Stam notes, “connotes illegitimacy.”

But although these fidelity-based reviews denigrating Cuarón’s *Great Expectations* are harsh, they are also expected. After all, if straightforward adaptations like *Pride & Prejudice* and *Oliver Twist* receive their substantial shares of standard fidelity criticism, it seems only logical that a film which so dramatically changes Dickens’ novel will also receive its fair share, as its large-scale alterations of the book are more noticeable and more overtly demonstrate what is lost in the process of adaptation. But actually, there are fewer fidelity-fixated reviews of *Great Expectations* than I initially expected; only 29 reviews are classified under IMDb’s “Hated It” category, the bulk of which reference the film’s relationship to the novel, and very few of the 81 “Loved It” reviews indicate that they liked the film because of how it portrayed the novel. Generally, the satisfied reviewers credit a number of other factors as reasons for the

film's success. IMDb reviewer "Celestialglow" deems the film "absolutely phenomenal" for five main reasons: "excellent acting," "beautiful cinematography," an "emotional script," "poignant scenes," and a "fabulous score" (10/7/2002). "Bdotson" writes, "I think *Great Expectations* is one of the best films I've seen. The cinematography is absolutely amazing. Every shot in this film is like looking at a painting. [...] The soundtrack is great, and so is the acting." In these comments, Bdotson exhibits the tendency of citizen reviewers to value the picturesque quality of a film,⁸ as though being able to view the scenes of a film as one would look at a painting is an important marker of the film's worth. And the brief review of "Jeff Gardner" implies that words cannot suffice to describe the movie's quality. Gardner writes, "I can't say enough about this movie...viewing should be required by law. It's absolutely amazing," and he claims that the film's tragic love story "offered excellent insight into [his] own life...something Hollywood rarely does" (10/11/1999).

But many of the reviewers who like Cuarón's *Great Expectations* do not just offer praise for the film; some even go so far as to rebut the usefulness of fidelity discourse, adamantly insisting that Cuarón's film should and must be judged on its merits as a stand-alone film rather than as a version of the novel. Citizen critic "Kbloor001" admits to "having read the book many times" but finds the film to be "a nice refreshing change" and declares, "To make a movie exactly like the book would be tedious, boring, and dumb. The movie is based off the book, its [*sic*] not the book itself" (1/22/2005). IMDB reviewer "LEO20" writes, "Films are not judged as works of literature—and yes, I mean the screen adaptations of the literary classics as well. Cuarón made a beautiful film, and

⁸ Recall Harry T. Yung, who describes *Oliver Twist*'s cinematography as "heartbreakingly beautiful, looking often like exquisite paintings" (44).

if in the process he had to alter the original story a bit, so be it” (8/13/2003). “Balthzar” makes it clear that the director and writer are distinct artists; in a review titled “A movie as itself,” Balthzar writes, “Too many times we fall into the trap of comparing a movie with the book. Every director and every writer has a vision and we must judge that vision through their respective mediums. [...] Do not be caught in that trap of comparing this film to the book. Dickens should never be compared to any screenwriter in the first place” (5/14/1999). And in a 10-star review of *Great Expectations*, “Bdotson” states, “Everyone’s first mistake with this film is to compare it to Dicken’s [*sic*] novel. DON’T DO THAT! Accept this film as it is. If you haven’t read the book, you’re probably better off because you won’t have a reference point to distort your view” (8/20/2002). In these comments, Bdotson and Balthzar do Stam and Brian McFarlane proud (if they can overlook the occasional error in punctuation) by rejecting faithfulness as a useful criterion for judging Cuarón’s adaptation. Bdotson calls comparisons a “mistake” and urges moviegoers to “accept” the film “as it is,” and she also inverts the typical hierarchy that fidelity discourse produces—literature as superior to its film derivatives—by characterizing the novel as a distorting “reference point” rather than a worthy predecessor.

Even *New York Times* film critic Janet Maslin politely disparages those who insist on fidelity in novel-to-film translations. In her review of Cuarón’s film, she writes:

Without resorting to purely random change, the filmmaker does dust some cobwebs off its radically abridged version of Dickens. Anyone who minds the loss of the name Pip (it’s now Finn) or the substitution of pelican-filled Gulf Coast landscapes for English moors can be duly horrified and should

assuredly stay home. But the switches made by this American version can be adventurous, even apt. And the film makes up in visual exoticism some of what it loses in character and context. (par. 1)

Maslin allows for viewers' resistance to and emotional rejection of the film's changes to Dickens' text—one can be “duly horrified”—but she proclaims that those strict, fidelity-flag-waving folk ought not venture to the theater, as their preoccupation with correctness will prevent them from appreciating the ways in which Cuarón “dusts the cobwebs” off Dickens' classic novel.⁹ Maslin also recognizes the substitutive qualities of film, asserting that the “visual exoticism” of the film—another nod to viewers' desire for picturesque adaptations—helps to balance the omissions and changes, but in doing so, Maslin shows that she, too, is prone to slipping into the typical *modus operandi* of fidelity discourse and lamenting what the novel loses via the process of film adaptation.

And so, whether reviewers of Cuarón's *Great Expectations* outwardly dismiss fidelity discourse or simply do not use it when they explain their reactions to the modernized adaptation, its absence in these reviews is noticeable and significant. Because Cuarón's *Great Expectations* departs so significantly from its novelistic source, it creates distance between itself and Dickens' novel, far more distance than what separates the novels and film adaptations discussed in the previous chapters. By being so different and so clearly unconcerned with fidelity, the film allows viewers to more easily forget about its origins. We see evidence of this distance when reviewers indicate that they responded differently to the film than they did the novel—or that they feel

⁹ Maslin's metaphor here echoes that of Stephanie Zacharek in her review of *Pride & Prejudice* (see Chapter 1), as both women indicate that a film can revitalize a classic novel and its characters back to life.

comfortable responding to the film even if they have never read the novel. Internet reviewer “Superfly_tnt1” begins his response to Cuarón’s film by stating, “I have never read Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, but I can tell you that this is one of the best movies I have ever seen” (6/9/2001), and “K-king2” writes, “I did not have any expectations before I saw this film...[because] I had not read the book” (9/10/2004). “Talvarado1” shows that an adaptation can be valued more than its source when she admits that she “was not very intrigued” by the novel when she read it in high school but now categorizes the film “as one of [her] all-time favorites” (2/13/2005). And “Chris-995,” a Belgian IMDb reviewer, creates a causal relationship between his unfamiliarity with the novel and his positive reaction to the film: “I never read the book, and that’s why I loved this movie. People should stop comparing this film to Dickens’ novel” (4/9/2002). Like Bdotson, Chris-995 implies that his unfamiliarity with the novel actually works to his advantage as a viewer, since he has no preconceived notions that might have prevented him from “loving” Cuarón’s film. This comment seems the antithesis of fidelity discourse, as the film is privileged to such a degree that the novel becomes the inferior work, the one with the potential to damage the other’s aura.

These types of responses, coupled with the relative scarcity of fidelity discourse in the reviews, indicate that the film’s movement away from its origin also moves viewers away from the stringent criteria of faithfulness. Previously in this project, I have discussed the degree to which Victorian novel film adaptations wrestle with “questions about the nature of authorship,” questions that Thomas Leitch argues are most commonly addressed by the “bulwark” of fidelity criteria. However, in the case of Cuarón’s *Great Expectations*, questions of authorship are not that pressing of a concern—there is little

wrestling and little debate. In the minds of the viewers, questions about the authorship of Cuarón's film can be quickly answered: because the film changes so much of Dickens' novel, the film is clearly authored by Cuarón, regardless of whether or not that attribution pleases filmgoers. As a result, fidelity criteria are simply not as useful in the evaluation of this film.

Therefore, this adaptation is more likely to be judged as a film rather than as an adaptation, as its substantial distance from its source text allows it to be perceived as a decidedly more independent creation than either *Oliver Twist* or *Pride & Prejudice*. Such a shift is aligned with what film scholars imply we should be doing in the first place when judging film adaptations. In “‘It Wasn’t Like That in the Book,’” Brian McFarlane argues that a film adaptation “has the right to be judged as a film; then, one of the many things it also is [is] an adaptation,” along with being “the product of a particular industrial system, a genre film, part of a tradition of national filmmaking, etc.” (par. 11). But even if this shifted perspective is fairer to and more appropriate for the medium of film, it seems that this increased emphasis on Cuarón's film as a *film* rather than as a *version* leaves many reviewers without the vocabulary to fittingly describe why they did or did not like the film. While fidelity discourse may have its limitations, it does offer filmgoers a comfortable set of terms by which to judge an adaptation; as McFarlane notes, even casual conversations amongst moviegoers typically involve some use of fidelity discourse: “‘Why did they change the ending?’ or ‘She was blonde in the book’ or, almost inevitably, ‘I think I liked the book better’” (par. 7). Audiences are comfortable making comparisons and feel qualified to do so, particularly with well-known stories like those told in Victorian novels. When the typical language of fidelity

evaluations becomes less useful because of an adaptation's large-scale deviation from its source text, some reviewers are at a loss to find appropriate substitutes to help them talk about the adaptation.

For instance, "Jamesbond-1" writes, "There are no words to describe a masterpiece like [Cuarón's *Great Expectations*]," and he lumps the cinematography, photography, and direction together as "excellent" and writes that Gwyneth Paltrow and Ethan Hawke, who play the leads, "manage to nail you to your seat and hold you touch you and thrill you" (10/7/2003). The entire review is only 67 words long, and not only is it not clear why so many elements of the film are "excellent," but the vague, minimally punctuated phrase "hold you touch you and thrill you" is clichéd, odd, and confusing. Another brief review by IMDb poster "Mifunesamurai" summarizes the success of Cuarón's film in two sentences: "A successful retelling of Dickens' classic set in today's world of art and lust. The cinematography by Emmanuel Lubezki [*sic*], along with Steven Weisberg's editing, are the major drawcards thanks to Alfonso's direction and a fine supporting cast" (2/22/2003). While the intent of this respondent is admirable, as Mifunesamurai attempts to mention a variety of filmic attributes (cinematography, editing, acting, and direction), the review offers little detail and explanation to clarify why the film is "successful." Also, there are a number of reviews like that of "Rick Peach," who peppers his positive response to *Great Expectations* with loads of nonspecific adjectives that yearn for more detail and support:

The film is beautiful. It is very rich in color and scope. The cinematography was outstanding and the direction was solid. The acting was brilliant [*sic*] all around. Robert De Niro is in the movie only briefly,

but brings respect to a role that could be just a flash in the pan for anyone else. Ethan Hawke and Gwyneth Paltrow are great and Chris Cooper turns in a very subtle but powerful performance as Finn's guardian. The film left me feeling good, what more could you ask for in a movie? (3/29/1999)

Here, there is a hint of some sophisticated analysis (Chris Cooper gives a "subtle but powerful" performance), but overall, the review is loaded with praise-filled adjectives that give few clues as to what the film actually does to succeed: "beautiful," "very rich," "outstanding," "solid," "brilliant," and "great" convey Rick Peach's satisfaction but provide little other information. The reviewer even posits a wildly subjective criterion for evaluating films: he says the film "left [him] feeling good," and he could not ask for more. With his woolly adjectives and his emphasis on an imprecise determinant of a film adaptation's success, Rick Peach's review and the many others like it stand in stark contrast with the meticulous and exhaustive standards of evaluation often posed by reviewers of *Oliver Twist* and *Pride & Prejudice*.

Therefore, while I recognize that it is impossible to conclude that the absence of long, detailed, and nuanced responses to *Great Expectations* is directly caused by the inapplicability of fidelity discourse to the film, such a conclusion *is* supported by this contrast. Even the quantity of Internet Movie Database reviews for each film seems indicative of how much reviewers have to say about each film: *Pride & Prejudice* is by far the most conversation-inducing of the three, as it has 681 posted reviews to date.¹⁰ *Oliver Twist* has only 90 IMDb reviews, and *Great Expectations* has fewer than double *Oliver's* total, with 158 reviews. Even though *Great Expectations* has generated more

¹⁰ All Internet Movie Database statistics in this paragraph current as of May 16, 2006.

reviews than *Oliver Twist*, its paltry number is more significant: *Great Expectations* has taken over eight years to generate 158 reviews while *Oliver Twist* has produced 90 in less than a year. Of course, other factors, such as the popularity of the Internet in 1998 versus its popularity in 2005, may have contributed to the current review totals, but the numbers still lend support to the notion that citizen critics have more difficulty responding to a modernized film adaptation of a Victorian novel than they do a traditional one.

Such an assertion is also supported by the gap that lies between the professional reviews and the citizen reviews of *Great Expectations*. In the responses to *Pride & Prejudice* and *Oliver Twist*, there is no glaring difference between the professionals' and citizen critics' reviews. Certainly, the professional critics' reviews are consistently more detailed and free of the minor grammatical and spelling errors that sometimes plague citizen critics' reviews, but there are also enough citizen reviews that rival the professionals' in terms of their thoughtfulness and thoroughness, enough to make it seem as though the divide separating the two groups is negligible and even imperceptible at times. But in the case of *Great Expectations*, the abundance of reviews that are vague, poorly written, and prone to hasty generalizations is striking, thus characterizing the citizen reviews *en bloc* as inferior to the polished professional reviews. But perhaps this should be expected. After all, professional reviewers are paid to watch and review films and are, in most cases, trained to do so. Most citizen critics do not have the benefit of professions that enable immersion in the world of film on a daily basis, nor have they been trained in film criticism; however, most citizen critics have received educations in which their mandatory English classes provided them with at least some experience in discussing and analyzing literature. And so, when a film adaptation resembles a film

more so than a literary adaptation, as in the case of Cuarón's *Great Expectations*, the professional reviewers remain equipped to adequately respond, but the nonprofessionals struggle to enter the discussion.

While the film's distance from its novelistic source decreases the applicability of fidelity discourse in reviewer criticism and leaves many reviewers unable to articulately respond, my previous chapters have shown that nostalgia often fuels fidelity discourse. But Cuarón's *Great Expectations* does not trade in nostalgia, as it erases all traces of Victoriana and instead recreates the very recent past. While it is true that some people may feel nostalgia for the dilapidated Florida fishing villages and the sleek, circa-1980s SoHo art world that the film portrays, that yearning does not rival the nostalgia provoked by representations of the Victorian Age, the yesteryear we so often picture when we think about the olden days. Unlike the reviews of *Oliver Twist* and *Pride & Prejudice*, very few reviewers of *Great Expectations* comment extensively on the film's representation of the period and settings. There are a number of passing mentions—"the southwest Florida scenery is excellent" ("Gbheron," 3/2/3000); the filmmakers "capture the atmosphere of the Florida Gulf Coast and the large decaying Southern mansion" ("BB-15," 2/28/1999)—but the reviewers write little that evidences a period or location-based nostalgia. Such an absence is telling when juxtaposed against the reviews of *Pride & Prejudice* and *Oliver Twist*, revealing that reviewers chiefly comment on setting when the scenery is that of the nineteenth century; otherwise, they mostly ignore setting or make only brief mentions of it, unable to comment extensively on such a not-so-distant locale.

That inability reveals that Cuarón's modernized *Great Expectations* is not the nostalgia-producing nor the nostalgia-saturated media object that Polanski's *Oliver Twist*

and Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* are. Although Cuarón's *Great Expectations* draws from Dickens' novel, it does not function as a Victorian Age tourist site, and it does not create the same sort of contrast with the present that the other straightforward adaptations do. After all, as Fred Davis explains, nostalgia is produced and shaped by the ways in which we fashion the past to contrast with our current situation—with “the events, moods, and dispositions of our present circumstances” (12). While some reviewers do indirectly express a nostalgic yearning for the Victorian era and for Dickens' original *Great Expectations* when they accuse Cuarón's film of bastardizing the book, the reviews do not show the same sort of overarching obsession with whether the film captures the “essence” or “spirit” of Dickens' novel as they do when assessing Wright's *Pride & Prejudice*. Stuart Tannock describes “nostalgic individuals” as those who “may...in the face of an unstable present, long to return to a stable past” (455), but for many filmgoers, Cuarón's *Great Expectations* fails to present much of a contrast with our present circumstances, and it does not portray a markedly “stable past” that helps us deal with our own “unstable present.” Instead, the film more resembles than diverges from our current society, consequently limiting the nostalgia invoked by viewing the film.

In *Slate*, critic David Edelstein exemplifies the decidedly unnostalgic response to Cuarón's film when he writes, “I've read the Dickens original over and over and seen all the previous adaptations, yet I didn't for an instant yearn for 19th-century London.” But Edelstein immediately qualifies his comment, explaining that he did not yearn for the nineteenth century “until the movie had ended, when I was scratching my head over why it finally seemed so un-Dickensianly miniature” (par. 1). Edelstein's comments first indicate that he expected this film to produce a nostalgic yearning for the Victorian Age

because he has read the novel numerous times “and seen all the previous adaptations,” which lends support to the point made in previous chapters about the ability of Victorian novels *and* films to create authoritative representations of the nineteenth century. But because Cuarón’s modernized *Great Expectations* is such a departure from the novel and its previous film adaptations, Edelstein watches the film without so much as an inkling of yearning for 19th-century London—the film does not incite that sort of nostalgic response. But after the film ends, Edelstein seems to be in the same figurative boat as many of the citizen critics, as he is “scratching his head” and puzzled by the way the film ends up being so unlike Dickens and yet also so very insignificant as a film on its own terms.

What so many of these reviews of *Oliver Twist* reveal, then, is that when a film adaptation of a Victorian novel moves drastically away from its novelistic source, many reviewers are left stranded. Their attempts to craft persuasive reviews are hampered both by their inability to fruitfully use fidelity discourse and because the film does not invite nostalgic reviews. Of course, the professional reviewers always manage to write at least something about every film, as their time limitations and contracts demand that they do, and so the citizen critics are the ones most significantly restricted by a contemporary filmic update of a Victorian novel. Robert Stam and Jennifer Green-Lewis both indicate that fidelity and nostalgia are shaped by subjects’ perceptions of and fixations on what has been lost in the movement from novel to film and from past to present. As I mentioned in the introduction to this project, Stam has characterized the “standard rhetoric” of adaptation studies as “an elegiac discourse of loss, lamenting what has been ‘lost’ in the transition from novel to film, while ignoring what has been ‘gained’” (3).

Jennifer Green-Lewis also offers a description of the underlying structure of nostalgia that echoes the loss-centric tendencies of fidelity discourse, noting that loss is “the precondition of nostalgia” (45).

The reviews of Victorian novel film adaptations support these assertions of Stam and Green-Lewis, as the reviewers unfailingly point out losses: what the film “leaves out” of the novel or what it “gets wrong” about the historical time period. But in the case of Cuarón’s *Great Expectations*, the critics have significantly less to say, and so I suggest that the brevity and imprecision of their comments might be due to the less conspicuous “losses” of the film. The film has moved so far away from Dickens’ novel that the most apparent loss is a given rather than a topic to be debated; so much has been “lost”—the setting, the time, characters, characters’ names, dialogue, plot twists—that it is a futile exercise on the part of the reviewers to point out these elements. Just as someone might look at you strangely if you ask them to point out the differences between a red hat and an ocean, two utterly dissimilar objects, so, too, are the differences between Dickens’ novel and Cuarón’s film so apparent that they do not warrant much discussion. But the other adaptations, *Oliver Twist* and *Pride & Prejudice*, remain close enough to their sources that their resemblances ironically provoke viewers to look for differences, just as it is a much more reasonable venture to compare two different styles of red hats than to compare a hat to an ocean. Also, there is little nostalgic loss in Cuarón’s *Great Expectations*; the film so closely resembles present society that there are few losses for which the viewer nostalgically yearns while viewing the movie, as the film depicts a world not yet lost to us.

In the upcoming coda, my focus shifts slightly: I move from identifying strands and patterns in reviewers' responses to Victorian film adaptations to positing what those findings might mean within the field of adaptation studies. These chapters have shown that reviewers use fidelity discourse, wax nostalgically about the Victorian past, rely on film adaptations to reconstruct their visible nineteenth centuries, and sometimes struggle to articulately respond to film adaptations of classic novels. But what are the implications of this research? To whom are these findings particularly valuable? And how can we use this information as we look ahead to the future of adaptation studies?

Coda



The previous chapters offer numerous observations and interpretations concerning reviewers' assessments of Victorian novel film adaptations, but it seems only fitting to ask: what now? So what? What are we to do with the knowledge that reviewers have difficulty responding to film adaptations when they cannot rely on fidelity discourse or ruminate nostalgically about the film? And even when they are seemingly at ease responding to adaptations, they often do so by using fidelity discourse or submitting to their nostalgic inclinations, methods that the current crop of film studies scholars energetically argue to be unhelpful, problematic, and unfair to film. However, I venture the idea that these methods—particularly fidelity discourse—are not altogether unproductive. To the contrary, my project shows that while some reviews inefficiently foreground faithfulness as the main criterion for evaluating a Victorian novel film adaptation, many evaluations of adaptations that include fidelity criticism are actually informative, articulate, and fruitful—and far from inefficient.

Of course, there are unhelpful citizen critics' reviews, responses that are inarticulate or that reflect narrow-mindedness or misinformation. Such variance is to be expected. However, the reviewers who warrant the most scrutiny here are the many who write strikingly eloquent and perspicacious responses. Consider the review of IMDb user "Spleen," who addresses Cuarón's *Great Expectations* thoughtfully and carefully:

It's not just that it's not as good as the book. How could it be? Nor is it that it's unfaithful to the book. Any book transferred to the screen is bound to be altered somehow, and there are many perfectly legitimate kinds of

alterations. It's okay to simplify the plot so that it will fit into a smaller space... It's okay to change the setting... It's okay to be mocking; it's okay to turn tragedy into satire; it's okay to make the ostensible hero into a villain - I can't think of a single change that would not, in some circumstances, be okay. What's unforgivable is to make changes and yet keep the original book, or the structure of the original book, as scaffolding. (2/6/2001)

Spleen's review goes on to reference another classic nineteenth-century novel, Jane Austen's *Emma*, and its contemporary film update, Amy Heckerling's film *Clueless*, as further validation for his opinion. According to Spleen, the novels of both Austen and Dickens "resist transposition into the twentieth century" because they "rely heavily, albeit in very different ways, on class-consciousness," but while Heckerling found appropriate "twentieth-century analogues" for Austen's story, Cuarón does not do the same for Dickens' tale.

In his response, Spleen shows his familiarity with nineteenth-century literature, discusses the thematic content of novels, analyzes directorial choices, and sports a respectable vocabulary, using words like "analogues," "albeit," and "transposition." He also illustrates how initial fidelity concerns can lead into nuanced analytical critiques, as he begins by using the typical rhetoric of fidelity discourse—"It's not just that it's not as good as the book"—but builds on that declaration to develop a complicated argument about alterations, analogues, and filmmaking, a position that merely uses fidelity discourse as a starting-off point for a more intricate exploration of an adaptation. Spleen's analysis of *Great Expectations* is a far cry from the supposedly standard "The film isn't

like the book and so I hate it!” mantra of fidelity discourse that so worries Stam and his fellow film scholars. And with more than 700 reviews to his name on the Internet Movie Database, *Spleen* is a prime example of the many prolific citizen critics who allow us to believe that nonprofessional reviewers of film adaptations can offer critiques that are useful, analytically productive, and provide the medium of film with the respect it deserves. A forum like the Internet Movie Database, which so clearly privileges and even reveres regular filmgoers and movie-lovers, illustrates that professional film critics are not the only reviewers capable of offering quality and insightful reviews—citizen critics are more than capable, too.

And yet, the concerns of film studies scholars continue to center on the destructive potential of fidelity discourse, as the scholars wonder about and try to discover what will allow reviewers, particularly citizen critics, to comment on filmic adaptation in constructive ways (i.e., without making references to the source texts and without relying on their nostalgic memories). But I argue that such concerns are less pressing than scholars insist, as it is clear that many critics of Victorian novel film adaptations are already in the habit of offering constructive reviews. It is improbable that an accessible evaluative method like fidelity discourse will ever completely disappear, particularly in regards to film adaptations of well-known novels like those from the Victorian age, but such a conclusion about fidelity discourse’s pervasiveness can be viewed as encouraging rather than disheartening. Fidelity discourse is not all bad, as it allows, first, for activity on the part of nearly all filmgoers and, second, for “a way in” to talking about adaptations. The discourse is one that enables viewers to speak and write about adaptations, providing a natural and somewhat instinctual evaluative structure—

that of comparison and contrast—as its formative foundation. And in advocating Genette’s theories of narratology as potentially productive for adaptation studies, Robert Stam emphasizes a central two-part question: “What events from the novel’s story have been eliminated, added, or changed in the adaptation, and, more important, why?” (34). Tellingly, even Stam’s central guiding question for adaptation studies begins by inquiring about the film’s fidelity—what has been “changed, eliminated, or added” in an adaptation—and then, like Oliver, it asks for more: more analysis and more thought about the reasons for those changes and additions. But respondents cannot get to the second part of that question without initially considering its first part, and reviewers, particularly citizen critics who lack formal training in and experience with film criticism, need to start somewhere. By asking fidelity questions first, many of them *are* able to develop analyses of adaptations that do “take into account the gaps between very different media and materials of expression” (Stam 46).

Such an ability—to be able to offer analyses that are cognizant rather than ignorant of the distinctions between film and literature—is a constructive skill that can be fostered by reviewers’ immersion in fidelity discourse. The multitude of IMDb responses that note the “impossibility” of “fitting” a lengthy novel into a two-hour film illustrate that filmgoers regularly recognize the “gaps” between the two media, and many of them review the adaptations with that recognition grounding their overall assessments. And even if reviewers’ awareness of the distinctions between movies and books does not develop much further beyond a basic recognition of difference, it still pushes them to compare the adaptation and its source on a variety of elements, such as plot, characters, mood, and use of setting. Such a move may seem elementary in theory but is actually

quite significant because it shows that viewers are reacting to films on technical and analytical levels rather than just viscerally and emotionally. Also, even Stam's questions about how the "'triage'" process develops an adaptation—asking what principles guide and determine the choices one makes when adapting a novel (34)—require reviewers to consider the authorial intentions of screenwriters and directors, a task not all that different from the ways in which the reviewers who engage in fidelity discourse often presume the authority to speak for the novels' authors and analyze their intentions. Such attempts to speak for the novel's author often expand into a consideration of the choices and ambitions of the film's "authors," as evidenced by the multitude of reviewers who try to interpret what Polanski's goals and ambitions were when he adapted *Oliver Twist* for the big screen.

Clearly, fidelity discourse in film criticism is strikingly more contributive than many of the major voices in adaptation studies characterize it to be, particularly when it is used unhesitatingly by nonprofessional critics. There is a general expectation that professional film critics be educated, knowledgeable, and well-versed in all film-related topics, able to discuss film adaptation on its own terms, without relying on their knowledge or impressions of the adaptations' source texts. But for Internet citizen critics, whose reviewing of films is neither constrained nor structured in any definitive way, there are no such expectations. And yet, the citizen critics' immersion in fidelity discourse often showcases their erudition by revealing them to be ardent guardians of knowledge, people who are as invested in protecting and honoring literature, history, and tradition as they are in doing the same for film.

And so, the abundance and constructiveness of much of the fidelity discourse in IMDb citizen critics' reviews argue against a sweeping dismissal of the discourse; instead, my findings in this project emphasize the notion that different contexts call for different types of discourses. Just as the wheedling one does with a flea market vendor to score a bargain is strikingly different than the negotiating an executive uses to secure a high-profile business deal, so, too, are the discourses employed in various arenas of film criticism effectively and necessarily different. Straightforward fidelity discourse may be met with derision or dismissal by readers of many scholarly film-themed publications, as such an approach would seem outdated and somewhat theoretically frail. But that same type of discourse is stable and effective in other contexts, such as casual conversations amongst filmgoers and, most markedly, in vast Internet reviewing forums like the Internet Movie Database and its many cousins.

Even the discourses used by professional film critics run the gamut of style, tone, and approach: the unabashedly intellectual and occasionally acerbic Stanley Kauffman (*The New Republic*), Anthony Lane (*The New Yorker*), and Jonathan Rosenbaum (*Chicago Reader*) write and review differently than do the mass-culture-friendly film critics of *USA Today* and *People* magazine. Both of these groups of critics use discourses that differ from that used by television-savvy critic Roger Ebert, and Ebert argues about films differently than *Salon*'s earnest hipster critic Stephanie Zacharek, who reviews differently than does a critic at a small-town Midwestern newspaper, and so on and so forth. There have always been different discourses for the various film-reviewing contexts that exist, and so the call for an across-the-board abstaining from any discourse, including that of fidelity, is a hasty and somewhat ignorant move. The findings of this

project only underscore what could be lost—and what might not be gained—if fidelity discourse and its nostalgic tributaries are abandoned.

In the end, it matters little how a film critic composes a review or arrives at his or her main claims—the process and the methods do not necessarily determine the quality of a review. As film critic Morris Dickstein of the *Partisan Review* explains, “The best critics simply see and hear more than most people and describe it in ways that give us a deep shock of recognition. Their writing teaches us to see by helping us to think” (“Film Criticism” 32). David Edelstein is similarly passionate about the contributions that insightful critics can make; in an interview, Edelstein explains why we will always need good critics: “We need them to keep the discussion going. To help catalyze the reaction between the viewer and the work. To teach by example how to think about what we see—or in some cases how not to think about it.” Edelstein continues, “Criticism is a living thing. At its best, it's revitalizing. And as we sink further and further into a stupor, we need it more than ever” (Aradillas 2).

The comments of both Edelstein and Dickstein help emphasize a main finding of this project: that a review that uses fidelity discourse or waxes nostalgically when critiquing an adaptation of a Victorian novel is not a travesty. Far from it. Rather, these reviewing methods are well-equipped to teach, to catalyze, to revitalize, and to provoke a “deep shock of recognition”—they can produce the great effects that any insightful review, fidelity-laden or otherwise, is potentially able to produce. In the world of adaptation studies and filmgoing, good reviews are needed to provoke interaction between audiences and films, to offer viewers ways to actually *think* about what they see while sitting on their living room couches or in the darkened auditoriums of their local

cineplexes. As Edelstein notes, good criticism takes on a life of its own, able to revitalize and save us from the stupor of our increasingly nonchalant interactions with art. If a film critique can perform such a feat—as so many of the reviews cited in this project do—then we cannot, and should not, ask for more.

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