

# ADAPTING DICKENS: NARRATOLOGY AND INTERACTION WITH *THE BOY AND THE CONVICT*

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**Resumen:** El presente artículo pretende examinar el impacto de Charles Dickens en las adaptaciones cinematográficas más tempranas y, especialmente, analiza el filme *The Boy and the Convict* (David Aylott, 1909). La influencia de la obra de Charles Dickens en la evolución del cine es innegable. Además de ser uno de los autores más adaptados a la gran pantalla, la estructura narrativa de sus novelas ha inspirado el proceso de ‘narrativización’ cinematográfica. Solo durante la era del cine mudo se contabilizan alrededor de cien adaptaciones de sus novelas. En concreto, nuestro estudio se centra en *The Boy and the Convict*, una producción británica que se erige como el primer intento de adaptar *Great Expectations* al cine. Sin embargo, no fue hasta 2001 cuando Graham Petrie estableció la relación intertextual entre esta película y la novela de Dickens. Nuestro propósito es analizar tanto su discurso narrativo como su estilo fílmico, en la creencia de que podrá arrojar nuevas perspectivas sobre el origen de la adaptación cinematográfica.

**Palabras clave:** Dickens, Aylott, *Great Expectations*, *Boy and Convict*, intertextualidad, adaptación.

**Abstract:** The present study looks at the impact of Charles Dickens’ work in early film adaptations, and considers in detail David Aylott’s film *The Boy and the Convict* (1909). The influence of Charles Dickens’ literature in the evolution of the cinema is undeniable. He is not only one of the authors more widely adapted to the screen, but the narrative structure of his novels has inspired the process of ‘narrativization’ of the motion pictures. Just during the silent era, around one hundred films were adaptations of his literature. Specifically, this research focuses on the earliest attempt at reshaping *Great Expectations*, a one-reel British production titled *The Boy and the Convict* (1909). The film was largely ignored by researchers until 2001, when Graham Petrie recognized it as a partial reworking of Dickens’ novel. We aim to analyse both the narrative discourse and the film style of this motion picture in the belief that it will shed some light on the origin of film adaptation.

**Key-words:** Dickens, Aylott, *Great Expectations*, *Boy and Convict*, intertextuality, adaptation.

## 1. CHARLES DICKENS ON SCREEN

Early cinema has been generally assumed as a preparatory period for a mature art form, but there exist different assumptions with regard to what kind of evolution

has experimented during this process. Tom Gunning, in an article titled “Now you see it, now you don’t: The temporality of cinema of attractions” (1996), isolates three approaches to theorize on what he denominates the ‘continuity mode’ that prevailed in early motion pictures. The first assumption responds to a natural logic in which early cinema is conceived as a period of less development: it envisions an advanced stage that cannot be reached due to a technological and economic limited knowledge. The second statement implies the discovery of cinema’s true essence, that is, the liberation of film from its theatrical origin. Finally, the third assumption declares that cinema truly appeared only when it discovered its mission of telling stories. One cannot help wondering whether these assumptions exclude each other necessarily. We would rather suggest that they can work together. Namely, technological and economic developments helped to meet the necessary improvements to give cinema its own character and to separate it from theatrical and vaudeville spectacles. This fact implied, necessarily, the emergence of a new form of narrative. However essential these factors prove to be in the evolution of the medium, we shall consider, additionally, the social, cultural and political changes taking place in society at that time. In fact, the success of cinema is too much related to the contents or subjects of the films and the way in which filmmakers had to adapt themselves to the taste and the demands of the audience applying at each country. In Ben Singer’s words, “intertwined with modernity technologically, sociologically, and phenomenologically, cinema seemed to epitomize and encapsulate modern experience more vividly than any other form of cultural expression”, meaning that motion pictures are “the very emblem of modern life, the quintessential manifestation of modernity” (2009: 37). Cinema worked as a universal cultural compendium as well as a means of dissemination with a high capacity of social penetration. Movie-going became a social experience, different authors pointing out the heterogeneity of early cinema audiences (Mayne, 1993; Hansen, 1994; Stokes and Maltby, 1999; Allen, 2006).

In Gunning’s thought, early motion pictures were defined as ‘cinema of attractions’, it is a cinema that “directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle —a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself” (1990: 58). However, by 1907, such ‘cinema of attractions’ proved to be exhausted. The repertoire of cinematic strategies in use was inadequate (Musser, 1990). Technological improvement, higher economic conditions and major changes in the social sphere led to a new model where cinema was considered a mass spectacle. Film directors soon realized that the possibilities of the new medium extended beyond recording

whatever was placed in front of the camera. There was a general move towards longer programs and more prestigious pictures, culminating in the appearance of multi-reel films (better known as feature films) and the rise of the star system (Thompson and Bordwell, 1994). Filmmakers began to tell more psychological and convoluted stories while the number of films produced increased more and more. There was a necessity to find new and respectable subject matter, which led to the production of a high number of films adapted from plays and novels (Cousins, 2003). Audiences began to show preferences which pointed the film production in certain directions (Chanan, 1990), being film adaptation one of them.

Notwithstanding the promising expectations of the film industry in terms of success and profitability, the process of true ‘narrativization’ of cinema (Gunning, 1990: 60) presented two challenges. On the one hand, complex stories requested the development of a set of devices for constructing a film narrative discourse. On the other hand, the speeding up of the film consumption rate entailed the production of a major number of moving pictures in less time. In order to solve both matters, studios moved towards the adaptation of classical literary and theatrical pieces and, specifically, looked at world-renowned authors as Shakespeare, Zola, Flaubert or Dickens (Cartmell and Whelehan, 2010). For the purpose of this essay, let us further examine Dickens’ influence in film adaptation. The “visual images of Dickens”, as Eisenstein defined his narrative (1949: 206), became a source of inspiration for David W. Griffith and other directors who, like him, attempted to bore the same relation to its audience that the British author had with his readers. Griffith, often referred in conventional histories of the cinema as the father of modern cinema (Gray, 2010) and one of the major innovators of the narrative film (Grant, 2010), declared that he made films in the same manner as Dickens wrote his novels (Arvidson, 1925). Such was his admiration that Griffith dedicated his feature production *One Exciting Night* to Dickens, the “master story-teller”, to whom “the motion picture owes more [...] than any other man” (Exhibitor Herald, October 21, 1922). “From very early on his literary career Dickens found his writing picked up and adapted for other purposes, not least because of the tremendous selling power of his name” (Mee, 2010: 84). Particularly in cinema, his novels were some of the most adapted, reaching almost one hundred silent film versions by 1927 (Petrie, 2001). Since then, the proliferation of films and TV serials based on his works has been unceasing. Specifically, *Great Expectations* has become one of his most adapted novels, being David Lean’s version from 1946 the only one that has acquired a classic status as an adaptation of Dickens (McFarlane, 1996). What remains a matter of some curiosity is that the earliest attempt to adapt

*Great Expectations* to the screen has largely been ignored by researchers. It was not until 2001 that Graham Petrie recognized *The Boy and the Convict* as a partial reworking of Dickens' novel. However important the works of researchers as Brian McFarlane are, this 1909 British silent film has never been examined in depth. Only Martin Sopocy in his article "Postscripts to James Williamson" (2010) has made some comments on the film. Thereby, what follows is intended primarily as an analysis on the narratology and the plot of *The Boy and the Convict*.

My particular interest in *The Boy and the Convict* as a case study of adaptation lies in: (a) its way of addressing itself to the problem of the limited length of the film; and (b) how far the visual aesthetic, as well as the narrative and editing techniques used, brings the film closer or moves it away from the spirit of the novel. For this purpose, I have analysed the UK version provided by the BFI Collection *Dickens Before Sound* (2006).

## 2. NARRATIVE DISCOURSE OF *THE BOY AND THE CONVICT*

*The Boy and the Convict* is a one-reel British production directed by David Aylott. It was produced and distributed in United Kingdom by the Williamson Kinetograph Company in May 1909. In the United States, the releasing agent was John J. Murdock's International Projecting and Production Company (IPPC). By the end of 1908, both the American Mutoscope & Biograph and the Edison Companies had signed an agreement and created the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC). The aim was to control competitors "by owning and charging licensing fees on all the existing patents" while limiting "the number of foreign firms which could join and import films" (Thompson and Bordwell, 1994: 34). The MPPC included just a few exclusive members. Among others, the agreement left out of consideration those foreign producers or agents who had been in the American market as recently as July 1908 (Bowser, 1990), like the Williamson Kinetograph Company. The independent corporations rising up outside the MPPC competed for coming to terms with those foreign producers. John. J. Murdock organized the International Projecting and Producing Company and signed up the Williamson Company.

We do not have reliable information about the exact release date in this country. Nonetheless, it had to take place by September 1909 since it was reviewed as a new release in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* on September 13, 1909. The unsigned review heavily criticizes the film from both narrative and aesthetical perspectives:

The story of this dramatic subject is not without interest but this dramatic [sic] is of the cheapest melodramatic kind that is being abandoned by the better class of producers. The waving of arms is not pantomime, and when the players in this film are not wildly gesticulating they merely walk through their parts. The scenic interiors are of the cheapest sort of painted canvas. The story tells of a wrongly imprisoned convict, who escapes by the aid of a youth. He then makes a fortune and returns to his home, where he is captured but is saved by the discovery of the true criminal. Much of the action is not clearly indicated (quoted in Sopocy, 2010: 326).

Martin Sopocy has rightly called attention to the fact that the reviewer seems to have perfectly understood the plot despite considering the action hard to follow. The surviving print contains no fewer than twelve intertitles, each one summarizing the action that comes after. They are ‘expository’ titles, very laconic, similar to chapter titles in a book (Thompson and Bordwell, 1994). One of them marks a time gap between scenes:

1. The blacksmith’s boy
2. His mothers [sic] grave
3. Food for the convict
4. An errand of mercy
5. Freed from his shackles. The pursuit
6. The warders baffled
7. Seven years after. Convict now a wealthy colonial thinks of the boy who befriended him
8. Receiving the letter
9. Realizing his ambition — the convict’s return and recapture
10. Finding the convict’s wife and daughter
11. A dying prisoner’s confession — convict’s innocence proved
12. A happy ending

The only two unexplained issues are the crime committed by the convict and the reason why the boy cries when we see him for the first time. Sopocy has suggested that some possible abridgment from a previous version would explain the latter event. Without denying completely this option, we would argue that the plot is consistent enough. The boy’s sorrow works as a prolepsis that anticipates the second scene. In fact, a subsequent title explains the reason of this sorrow: his mother is dead. Given the length of the film (ca. 12 minutes) and the extension of *Great Expectations* (ca. 550 pages), selectivity in plot and characters is necessary. This fact requests, almost inevitably, an arrangement of the events different from the order in which these events are placed in the novel, as well as an oversimplification of the narrative, as we aim to show.

## 1.1 Selectivity in plot and characters

The rendering of a complex novel with multiple subplots into a one-reel film demands a good deal of compression. *The Boy and the Convict* condenses the Pip-Magwitch relationship from *Great Expectations*, the most striking shift lying in its own happy ending, in which the convict not only remains alive, but he is acquitted of the crime for which he was originally imprisoned. An explanatory title precedes the first scene (i.e. “The blacksmith’s boy”), suggesting that the boy is the blacksmith’s son. While in *Great Expectations* Pip has lost both his mother and his father, in the film he is a single-orphan child (the spectator discovers that his mother is dead in the second title). In Dickens’ novel, the child lives with his sister and her husband, Joe Gargery. The latter represents kindness and empathy, while the former is a sort of wicked stepmother. In *The Boy and the Convict*, the boy’s father plays the role of both Joe (as a male figure) and Mrs. Gargery (as a strict and punishing authority). Furthermore, whereas the director focuses on the relationship between Pip and Magwitch, he sets aside the Satis House’s plot. Aylott offsets this lack by introducing two female characters who play the role of Magwitch’s wife and daughter. Inevitably, they remind us of Miss Havisham and Estella.

The inciting incident of both the novel and the film is the convict’s escape. However, *Great Expectations* opens with the powerful image of the tombstone of Pip’s parents, in the churchyard at the marshes. There, Magwitch threatens him with death if he does not bring him some food and a file. No more information about the convict is provided until he is captured and the officers request Mr. Gargery’s aid. On the contrary, the film opens with two officers asking for the blacksmith’s help (Aylott, 1909: [00:14-00:26]).



**Figure 1.** Opening of *The Boy and the Convict*. Two officers ask for the blacksmith’s help.

The meeting between the boy and the convict happens in second place, while it is in the fifth scene when the spectator discovers that the two officers and the blacksmith are looking for the convict. We attend the whole pursuit until the convict manages to escape. It seems of importance to pay some attention to the word ‘pursuit’ appearing on the fifth intertitle. The pursuit was the main element in chase films. The chase had been the predominant format from 1904 to 1908 and played a key role in the transition from the ‘cinema of attractions’ to a cinema based on a narrative model (Keil, 2001; Abel, 2005; Beaver, 2006; Zimmer, 2015). However, contrary to common chase films, no reason for the pursuit is supplied in the film at any moment. Therefore, *The Boy and the Convict* lacks a pre-chase scenario that develops the protagonist’s culpability. The reason may perfectly fit in Keil’s argument that “the single reel format... would push filmmakers to consider ways of formulating the central components of narrative other than those established within the chase film” (2001: 48-49). In this case, David Aylott considered it unnecessary to explain the reasons for Magwitch’s pursuit to the audience. On the contrary, the chase functions as the triggering factor that makes the plot advance through different scenarios.

While in *Great Expectations* Magwitch is captured —although he escapes again later—, in *The Boy and the Convict* he escapes from the very beginning. This decision accelerates the time of the story and drives out other events present in the novel. Whereas he is also arrested by the end of the film, a major turning point takes place: a prisoner’s confession reveals Magwitch’s innocence. He is finally released and allowed to go back home (Aylott, 1909: [10:07-11:08]).



**Figure 2.** A prisoner’s confession reveals the convict’s innocence.

Such a difference with regard to the original novel clearly responds to the necessity to legitimise the sort of cinema that evolved together with the process of

‘narrativization’. Films should not be useful only for entertainment, but also for educating the audience. As the popularity of the new media begun to spread rapidly beyond the working and the middle classes, it became an object of scrutiny. By 1909, both in Europe and in the United States, several debates concerning the positive or negative impact of the cinema were in the spotlight. All these considerations resulted in attempts at regulation of films through legislation. The Cinematographic Act in United Kingdom and, especially, the National Board of Censorship in the United States were two examples of cinema control (Whertheimer, 1993; Jones, 2001; Fisher, 2002). As IPPC was subjected to the National Board of Censorship, it seems reasonable that *The Boy and the Convict* introduced a moralizing end where the convict could demonstrate that he was falsely accused. Furthermore, Pip’s willingness to help Magwitch to escape —he lies to the officers about the convict’s whereabouts twice (Aylott, 1909: [03:22, 07:33])— and his gratitude towards the convict —Pip visits Magwitch’s family to inform his wife and daughter of his imprisonment (Aylott, 1909: [08:37])— prevails over Pip’s moral concerns, which in *Great Expectations* lead him to a constant search of redemption.



**Figure 3.** Pip lies to the officers about the convict’s whereabouts.

In *The Boy and the Convict*, Pip only rejects Magwitch momentarily when the convict reveals himself as his benefactor. Right away, Pip regrets and shakes his hands, suggesting that the young gentleman accepts the fortune he has received from the convict (Aylott, 1909: [06:29-07:24]). The almost complete absence of Pip’s internal struggle between morality and his great expectations (i.e. one of the major themes of the novel) arises due to the limitations of a one-reel film; but it also reflects a primitive stage in the development of narrative and editing techniques.



## 1.2 Film style and punctuation

Whilst the Williamson Kinetograph Company had gained renown because of introducing several innovations in film punctuation during the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Boy and the Convict* did not follow the same trend. Notwithstanding the very limitations of the new medium, this motion picture was not concerned with the improvements taking place at that time.

The development of a film narrative discourse involved changes in acting as well. Previously, the actors were demanded to tell the story with gestures clearly visible at stage distance (Bowser, 1990). Since movies were mainly conformed by long shots, exaggerated gestures or pantomime were necessary in order that the audience could follow the action. However, as the camera started to show closer views of the actors, this style came into conflict with the audience's request of a natural acting. Exaggeration became too bothering for the illusion of realism. Instead, facial expression was strengthened. So far, camera used to be placed 12 or 16 feet back, showing the actors from head to toe. By 1909, the '9 foot-line' was introduced, cutting off the actors below the knee (Thompson and Bordwell, 1994). Furthermore, the constant movement of the actors along the frame was substituted by a rigid and motionless standing for a more effective way of portraying feelings. The natural acting also required that actors should not look directly to camera. The aim was simply to imitate real life: no grand entrances and exits, no eloquent conversations, or interaction among characters.

In the review we have quoted above, *The Boy and the Convict* is precisely criticized due to its old style, which is considered artificial and even ridiculous. In fact, the film only uses long-shots or medium long-shots with a static camera for each scene, except from one close-up. It is what Gerard Genette has denominated 'nonfocalized' narrative, or narrative with 'zero focalization', namely, "a narrative with omniscient narrator" (1980: 189). This omniscient narrator would coincide with the 'implied author' that Porter Abbott has defined as the superior intelligence that the viewer gradually constructs "to infer the intended meanings and effects of the narrative" (2008: 235). It works as a witness whose point of view induces the audience to look at some specific directions. Additionally, since the stage distance is constant and the camera remains fixed in the same position, no character's perspective is favoured. Such omniscience is far removed from the nature of *Great Expectations*. Indeed, one peculiarity of *Great Expectations* which makes it different from other Dickens' novels is that it is written in first person. Thereby, the novel introduces Pip's double role as both the hero (intradiegetic level) and the

narrator (extradiegetic level) of the story. In Genette's terminology, it is a 'fixed internal focalization' in which the point of view of the narrator and the perspective of the hero merge.

As the camera never gets close to the characters, the stage distance makes it difficult to capture the facial expression of the actors. Consequently, they gesticulate exaggeratedly, use old resources as pointing at some direction to indicate where the convict has escaped, or look directly to the camera. In general, the film is full of excessive pantomime reflected in continuous shaking of hands, exuberant movements of arms and stagey soliloquy. Yet another criticized aspect has been the setting. During this period, the production companies increased revenues and they replaced the earlier open-air stages and cramped interior studios by larger studio buildings. These new studios combined sunlight and some kind of electric lighting, as well as incorporated three—dimensional settings. Nevertheless, *The Boy and the Convict* still uses painted theatrical-style backdrops for interior scenes, with some real furniture mixed in. The result is a lack of perspective that undermines the sense of reality.



**Figure 4.** Painted theatrical-style backdrops in *The Boy and the Convict*.

Notwithstanding, one cannot help wondering whether the film deserves such fierce criticism with regard to the acting style and the film punctuation. Let us briefly compare *The Boy and the Convict* to other two Dickens' adaptations from 1909: James Stuart Blackton's *Oliver Twist* and David W. Griffith's *Cricket on the Hearth*. The first difference has to do with the producer country: whereas *The Boy and the Convict* is a UK film, both *Oliver Twist* and *The Cricket on the Hearth* are US productions. The second distinction lies in the title, for the two American versions keep the original title of the novels, thus providing a clear connection

between novel and film. Contrary to the reception of *The Boy and the Convict* in the United States, American reviewers welcomed both *Oliver Twist* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*. On *Oliver Twist*, the journal *Moving Picture World* wrote: “the acting is unusually good, and, with the exception of a few points, the photographic quality is quite satisfactory” (1909, June 5). Griffith’s adaptation was said to “evinced the true atmospheric tenderness intended by Dickens. The settings are typical and the scenes have the local color, while the characterization is of the quaint of old English type. All this is vivified by superb photography” (MPW, 1909, May 22; *Variety*, 1909, May 1). Apart from praising the acting, *Moving Picture World* stated that “technically the film is almost beyond criticism. [...] The picture is clear and the movement of the characters is so smooth and even that there is no blurring. [...] The most critical audiences will be pleased with it” (1909, June 5). We pointed out in the first section that Griffith is often referred as one of the major innovators in the development of film narrative and editing techniques. *The Cricket on the Hearth* is a good example, Griffith masterfully implementing the parallel editing and showing characters moving in consistent directions in the contiguous spaces. The chronological order of the events in the novel and the order in which those events are arranged in the film are different. In the novel, it is not revealed until the end that the mysterious elderly stranger that comes to visit Peerybingle’s house is Edward Plummer, who was thought to be dead. The film provides the spectator with this information from the very beginning, thus prevailing suspense over intrigue. Titles are used economically to identify characters and plot situations. The camera still remains static, but it is placed closer to the actors so that their facial expressions and movements are visible. Outside locations mix in three-dimensional settings with real furniture.



**Figure 5.** Outside locations in *The Cricket on the Hearth*.

Whether modern techniques of editing, camerawork, acting and lighting are properly combined in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, the same cannot be said about *Oliver Twist*. The film presents nineteen self-contained scenes, most of them introduced by an explanatory title. Like in *The Boy and the Convict*, the camera remains static. The large distance between the camera and the stage impedes the audience from perceiving the actors' facial expression, but an attempt to convey a more natural acting is done. Here again, the film uses painted theatrical-style backdrops for interior scenes, with some real furniture mixed in.



**Figura 6.** Large distance between camera and actors, and painted backdrops in *Oliver Twist*.

Thereby, after comparing the film style in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *Oliver Twist* and *The Boy and the Convict*, one may conclude that: (a) the explorations of the possibilities of film style developed over the span of several years and its implementation degree differed from one filmmaker to another; and (b) *Oliver Twist* and *The Boy and the Convict* were quite similar in terms of film style, so the harsh criticism that the latter received in the United States might be explained because of its foreign character. *Oliver Twist* was produced by the Vitagraph Company, which was one of the corporations included in the MPPC agreement. The Patents Company's efforts to monopolize the domestic market made the distribution of unlicensed films very difficult, and it seems that film magazines and journals helped to promote this purpose. *The Boy and the Convict* was forgotten for years until Graham Petrie rediscovered the film in 2001.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This essay analyses the narrative discourse and the film style of the one-reel British production *The Boy and the Convict* with regard to its original source, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. The film adaptation focuses on the Pip-Magwitch relationship, while it sets aside other key plots and characters present in the novel —i.e., Mr. and Mrs. Gargery, Miss Havisham, Estella or Mr. Jaggers—. Selectivity is necessary to condense such a large novel in a few minutes. The narrative discourse is also characterized by the use of a 'nonfocalized' narrative where the point of view of an omniscient narrator directs our attention. Such omniscience drives out one of the most attractive aspects of *Great Expectations*: Pip's role as both the hero and the narrator of the story. Apart from this, the film produces its own happy ending, which we suggest it responds to the censorship imposed at that time.

*The Boy and the Convict* was criticized in the United States because of the use of long-shots with a static camera, the unnatural acting and the utilization of painted theatrical-style sets. However, a comparison between this film and two other Dickens' adaptations from the same year suggests that the harsh criticism may respond to the foreign character of the film.

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