

# Balzac British Style: Avarice, Austerity and the Tight Spaces of Rex Tucker's Eugénie Grandet (BBC 2, 1965-66)

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## **BALZAC BRITISH STYLE: AVARICE, AUSTERITY, AND THE TIGHT SPACES OF REX TUCKER'S *EUGÉNIE GRANDET* (BBC 2, 1965–66)<sup>1</sup>**

Since its publication in 1833, *Eugénie Grandet* has continued to fascinate the adaptive imagination. In January 1835, only two years after Balzac's novel had appeared in print, Bayard and Paulin staged their own version of the story, under the title *La Fille de l'avare*, at the Théâtre du Gymnase in Paris, where it ran for over 300 performances.<sup>2</sup> In the twentieth century, silent filmmakers — hungry for narrative material to satisfy the demands of their new medium — were also quick to exploit the dramatic potential of this celebrated *Scène de la vie de province*. In France, Émile Chautard directed the earliest known cinematic adaptation of *Eugénie Grandet* in 1910. A little over a decade later, in 1921, Hollywood identified the novel as a star vehicle for Rudolph Valentino in Rex Ingram's *The Conquering Power*, a film whose ending departed significantly from that of the source text by reuniting the eponymous heroine with her beloved Charles. Since the advent of sound film in 1927, cinematographers have returned time and again to *Eugénie Grandet*, with big-screen adaptations including Mario Soldati's 1947 film, *Eugenia Grandet*, in Italy, Emilio Gómez Muriel's 1952 version, released under the same title in Mexico, and Sergeï Alexeiev's *Evgeniya Grande*, which appeared in Russia in 1960.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the confines of cinema, Balzac's novel has also been adapted for radio, most recently in the United Kingdom, where in 2014 novelist Rose Tremain recreated the story as a two-part drama for BBC Radio 4 starring Sir Ian McKellen.

Often overlooked in the array of media to have adapted *Eugénie Grandet*, however, is television. The small screen retains a particularly vibrant interest in Balzac's text, with at least six versions of the story having appeared on television since the 1950s. Not surprisingly, three of these have been produced in France, and have encompassed adaptations by Maurice Cazeneuve (1956), Alain Boudet (1968), and Jean-Daniel Verhaeghe, whose 1994 film was the second of five Balzac adaptations that the director has produced for French television to date. Outside of Balzac's native country, versions of *Eugénie Grandet* have also featured on the small screen in Italy (1963, dir. Alessandro Brissoni), and Australia, where Patrick Barton's *The Cross of Gold* was broadcast on ABC Television in 1965.

Yet despite the frequency with which *Eugénie Grandet* has been adapted for television, researchers have continued to neglect this rich corpus of material, and to ignore the precious insights it can reveal into Balzac's fiction and the adaptive process more generally. This scholarly indifference towards television versions of *Eugénie Grandet* can be attributed, at least in part, to the widespread notion that television popularises literary material for a mass audience, and in so doing often deprives Balzac of his richness and complexity in adaptation. While recognising that this is by no means true of all small-screen versions of the novelist's work, Anne-Marie Baron argues that

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to express my warmest thanks to Michelle Cheyne for reading and commenting on an early draft of this piece. I would also like to acknowledge my profound debt to the late Christopher Barry, for his invaluable assistance in helping me to secure a copy of the BBC version of *Eugénie Grandet*.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of theatrical adaptations of Balzac's work, see for example Linzy Erika Dickinson, *Theatre in Balzac's "La Comédie humaine"* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, Faux Titre, 2000), p. 344–49.

<sup>3</sup> For a filmography of screen adaptations of *Eugénie Grandet*, see Anne-Marie Baron and Jean-Claude Romer, "Filmographie de Balzac", *AB* 2005, p. 395–409 (p. 396–97). An updated version of this filmography has appeared more recently on the website of the Société des Amis de Balzac at <http://www.lesamisdebalzac.org/eugenie-grandet/> (accessed 15 November 2017).

television as a medium tends to strip away the realist detail that is integral to Balzac's literary aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> Writing on Verhaeghe's 2009 reimagining of *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote*, for example, Baron claims that the director reduces the source narrative à "l'illustration et à l'affadissement pour plaire au plus grand nombre", and that this version offers spectators little more than "une petite idée de l'intrigue de cette œuvre" (2009, p. 355). Equally, television adaptations of Balzac's work can be seen to have been overshadowed by scholarly interest in the big screen, and by the persistent critical view that film is the more artistically sophisticated of the two media. "While film adaptations exhibit variety in their choice of sources, and directorial individuality and flair in their particular reinterpretations", writes Sarah Cardwell, "television adaptations are often regarded as dull, formulaic products, further subsumed into categories with vaguely derogatory labels (heritage television, or costume drama, for example), rather than being regarded as potentially good, 'serious drama'" (2007, p. 182).

Focusing on the BBC television version of *Eugénie Grandet* (1965–66, dir. Rex Tucker), this article challenges these negative assumptions by demonstrating that Balzac's novel lends itself readily to adaptation for the small screen and, moreover, to reinvention in a different national context. This three-part mini-series appears as a fascinating case study through which to explore the recreation of *Eugénie Grandet* on television, most notably because it illustrates the key importance of space in both Balzac's text and Tucker's mini-series. As a point of departure for this analysis, I want to begin by considering the ways in which *Eugénie Grandet* proved inherently suited to adaptation for British television during the 1960s, when the BBC turned to nineteenth-century French literature just as domestic dramas were gaining in popularity with television audiences. The second part of my discussion focuses on the representation of space in Tucker's adaptation, and on the way in which this mini-series sheds new light on the spatial dynamics of Balzac's novel. As Jorgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Henriette Thune have argued, adaptations often highlight themes and narrative techniques that are merely implicit in the source material, and in so doing invite us to view that material differently. "Traits of the adapting text", they explain, "infer upon the adapted text and the other way around in a process that may be termed chiasmic, or, perhaps more relevantly, dialogic in Bakhtin's understanding of the word" (2011, p. 9). Through its careful exploitation of close-ups and elevated camera angles, the BBC version of *Eugénie Grandet* foregrounds both the sense of claustrophobia that underlies Balzac's representation of the Grandet household and, more unusually, his sensitivity to the role of the staircase within this domestic space. Finally, analysis of this serial can help to deepen our understanding of some of the key cultural imperatives surrounding the adaptation and domestication of its source text. In particular, I wish to consider how Tucker resituates *Eugénie Grandet* within the social and cultural space of 1960s Britain as he reflects on the post-war austerity from which Britain had only recently emerged, and warns against financial over-indulgence as a by-product of the 1960s economic boom. Exploring the ways in which this serial fits into a British context also enables us to contemplate how adaptations can play on their connections with other artistic works, here evidenced by the BBC's decision to broadcast *Eugénie Grandet* over Christmas and New Year, a scheduling which invited British viewers to compare Balzac's Grandet with Dickens's own fictional miser, Scrooge.

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<sup>4</sup> Among the French television adaptations of Balzac to have proved adept at balancing artistic innovation with fidelity to the source material are the 1980 version of *Le Curé de Tours* directed by Gabriel Axel, and Jacques Deray's 1982 recreation of *Les Secrets de la princesse de Cadignan*. For a further overview of television adaptations of Balzac's work, see chapter "Adapting Balzac" in Watts, 2017, p. 164–170.

Tucker's version of *Eugénie Grandet* was first broadcast on the BBC in three 45-minute episodes ("Love", "Gold", and "Inheritance") between 18th December 1965 and 1st January 1966. With a screenplay by John Elliott and Elizabeth Holford, the programme benefited from the longstanding directorial experience of Tucker, who was well accustomed to the demands of both literary adaptation and the series/serial format.<sup>5</sup> Having started his career with BBC radio in 1937, Tucker subsequently moved to television, where he oversaw the production of numerous dramas, including a six-part version of Alexandre Dumas père's *Les Trois Mousquetaires* in 1954. His adaptation of *Eugénie Grandet* would prove to be the first of three BBC mini-series based on Balzac novels to appear during the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1968, *Le Père Goriot* provided the source material for a four-part serial directed by Paddy Russell, followed in 1971 by Gareth Davies's version of *La Cousine Bette* in five episodes. The reasons behind this surge of enthusiasm for adapting Balzac's work are rooted in the organisational and programming changes that were taking place at the BBC during this period, which I have discussed at length elsewhere (Watts, 2014, p. 182–83) and will therefore summarise only briefly here.

By the 1960s, literary adaptations were an established part of the BBC's television output. In 1950–51, the first television drama serial on the BBC was an adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, which in 1951 was followed by a reworking of Anthony Trollope's *The Warden*.<sup>6</sup> However, the 1960s would also testify to the BBC's determination to extend its drama portfolio to encompass works that had either never been adapted for British television before, or that had previously been deemed too risqué for a BBC audience. One of the key drivers behind this shift in the Corporation's programming strategy was Hugh Carleton Greene, who was appointed BBC Director-General in January 1960. Greene arrived at the BBC determined to modernise the organisation, and to allow the creative talents at its disposal to flourish. "I wanted to open the windows and dissipate the ivory-tower stuffiness which still clung to some parts of the BBC", Greene explained of his appointment. "I wanted to encourage enterprise and the taking of risks" (Hewison, 1986, p. 26). Under Greene's influence, such risks would include adapting an increasing number of authors from outside the domestic canon, not least Balzac, whose work was introduced to British television viewers for the first time with Tucker's version of *Eugénie Grandet*.

Another key factor in the BBC's decision to adapt material from *La Comédie humaine* was the Corporation's willingness to invest in the production of longer, more complex drama series/serials. Faced with strong competition from its commercial rival ITV, the BBC identified the series/serial format as a means of attracting and retaining viewers over an extended period. Central to this enthusiasm for developing multi-episode dramas was Sydney Newman, who was recruited as Head of BBC Drama in 1963. Having presided over the creation of the popular single-play series *Armchair Theatre*, first broadcast on ITV in 1956, Newman joined the BBC with a remit to enhance both the diversity and quality of its drama programming.<sup>7</sup> Literary adaptations would form an important part of his work in this area, as illustrated most strikingly by

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<sup>5</sup> This article defines the terms "serial" and "mini-series" as a television drama or adaptation that unfolds and concludes within a set number of episodes. By contrast, a television series adopts an open-ended format, and can (in cases such as the ITV series *Coronation Street*, 1960–present) run over a number of years. For further discussion of the history and evolution of the term "classic serial", see for example Robert Giddings and Keith Selby, *The Classic Serial on Television and Radio* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 1–30.

<sup>6</sup> See Cardwell, 2007, p. 187.

<sup>7</sup> Further background on Sydney Newman's appointment and subsequent work at the BBC is provided by John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 74–78. On the BBC's development of serial adaptations of French literature (including Balzac) during the 1960s and 70s, see also Giddings and Selby, *The Classic Serial on Television and Radio*, p. 26, p. 34–35.

the 26-part version of John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* that Newman was instrumental in bringing to the screen. First broadcast in 1967, this long-running serial proved enormously popular with audiences, and concluded in 1969 with a final episode that attracted a peak audience of 18 million viewers. Newman's use of the series/serial format to maximise ratings and offer viewers sophisticated adaptations of classic literature would be bolstered by the launch of BBC 2 in April 1964. The creation of the new channel opened up a Saturday evening slot for drama serials that over the course of the 1960s and early 1970s was often filled with adaptations of nineteenth-century French texts including Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1964) and *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1970), and Zola's *Nana* (1968) and *Germinal* (1970). The BBC versions of *Eugénie Grandet*, *Le Père Goriot*, and *La Cousine Bette* all occupied this slot during a period of interest in Balzac's work that remains unsurpassed on British television.

Just as the BBC was fascinated by *La Comédie humaine*, *Eugénie Grandet* fitted comfortably into the realist concerns of British television during the 1960s. This was a decade in which British broadcasters became increasingly interested in representing domestic life, and in infusing their programmes with a deeper, grittier sense of social realism than had been exhibited on television before. One of the key motivating factors behind this new aesthetic was the publication of the Pilkington Report on Broadcasting, which in 1962 advised television companies of their responsibility to educate as well as entertain viewers, and warned them against "trivialising" the medium with a proliferation of game shows and quiz programmes. Coupled with the wider mood of social change that swept through 1960s Britain — not least the rise of the feminist movement in the second half of the decade — the Pilkington Report contributed to the emergence of a documentary style in British television drama that penetrated the private sphere to an unprecedented degree. This aesthetic was exemplified on the BBC by dramas such as Ken Loach's *Up the Junction* (1965), which showed a young woman struggling with her decision to undergo an illegal abortion. Watched by 10 million viewers, *Up the Junction* was followed in 1966 by *Cathy Come Home*, another groundbreaking television play directed by Loach in which the female protagonist faces losing her home, marriage, and child as a result of the intransigence of the British Welfare State.<sup>8</sup> In recounting its own tale of domestic turmoil, *Eugénie Grandet* was well matched to the fascination with private life that was such a prominent feature of 1960s British television. In his 1833 preface to the text, Balzac had described himself as a writer who exposed stories from beneath the apparently tranquil surface of the provinces. "Si tout arrive à Paris", he declared, in a memorable formulation, "tout passe en province : là, ni relief, ni saillie ; mais là, des drames dans le silence ; là, des mystères habilement dissimulés" (*CH*, III, p. 1025). *Eugénie Grandet*, in which a family is thrown into crisis by the love between Eugénie and her cousin Charles, is just such a hidden drama, and as such resonated strongly with the vogue for domestic realism that coursed through British television during the 1960s.

At the outset, Tucker's version of *Eugénie Grandet* highlights its status as a domestic drama that takes viewers inside the private spaces inhabited by the Grandet family. Echoing Balzac's artistic determination to penetrate behind closed doors, the opening shots of episode 1 show Charles Grandet (David Sumner) trimming his sideburns in front of his bedroom mirror. Having introduced us to the young dandy via the depiction of this private activity, Tucker focuses our attention on the young man's relationship with his father, whose voice calls out from the next room. The subsequent conversation between Guillaume Grandet and his son provides a brief overview of the

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of the impact of the Pilkington Report on British television programming, see for example Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama: A History* (London: BFI, 2003), p. 56.

Grandet family, as the older man describes the provincial relatives that Charles will be staying with in Saumur. Hinting at personal differences that have caused him not to see his brother Félix for more than twenty years, Guillaume claims that his sibling “was never young” and reminds Charles that he has a cousin, Eugénie, “born late in the marriage” (Tucker, 1965-66). After establishing the familial resonance of the plot, this sequence concludes by evoking the catalyst for the domestic crisis that follows, as Guillaume, having bid farewell to Charles, removes a pistol from his desk drawer. In a moment of violence on which Tucker does not allow us to intrude visually, Guillaume is seen walking out of frame, before the sound of a gunshot reverberates off screen. This prologue differs significantly from the source text, which begins with a dense, realist description of Saumur. During the 1960s, the capacity to depict exterior locations of this kind remained largely beyond the financial and technical reach of television serials, production of which was confined mostly to the studio. What the opening of the novel and its BBC adaptation do have in common, however, is their shared enthusiasm for accessing the private realm. Like Tucker, who takes us inside the Paris home of Guillaume Grandet, Balzac accompanies us to the door of his fictional brother Félix, and once there launches into a biographical description of the old cooper. Starting out on the narrow, cobbled street, Balzac’s narrator invites us to contemplate the shops and ancient buildings before depositing us, finally, at “la maison pleine de mélancolie où se sont accomplis les événements de cette histoire” (*CH*, III, p. 1030). As Nicole Mozet observes of this opening passage, “l’entrée dans le texte coïncide avec un déplacement dans l’espace” (1982, p. 148). In *Eugénie Grandet*, Balzac moves the reader from the public to the private sphere, revealing an artistic eagerness to contemplate family life that would later underpin Tucker’s own version of the story.

If Balzac’s interest in the theme of privacy resonates strongly with television, so, too, does the medium prove well equipped to articulate his concern with space and claustrophobia in *Eugénie Grandet*.<sup>9</sup> In the 1960s — an era that long predated the advent of widescreen and high-definition technology — television dramatists were obliged to work within narrow technological parameters. During this period, sound and image quality were still relatively poor, a situation that would only begin to improve significantly with the introduction of colour programming on the BBC in 1967. Earlier black-and-white serials such as *Eugénie Grandet* therefore relied heavily on close-ups in order to capture the details of sets and the facial expressions and movements of the actors on screen. As John Ellis points out, close-ups have the additional effect of involving the viewer more closely in the action than equivalent shots in the cinema. “Whereas the cinema close-up accentuates the difference between screen-figure and any attainable human figure drastically by increasing its size”, writes Ellis, “the broadcast TV close-up produces a face that approximates to normal size. Instead of an effect of distance and unattainability, the TV close-up generates an equality and even intimacy” (1982, p. 131). Despite its technical limitations, British television during the 1960s was a medium well suited to representing notions of smallness, claustrophobia, and spatial confinement.

Tucker’s version of *Eugénie Grandet* engages actively with the constrictedness that characterises television as a medium. The opening credits of this adaptation reflect subtly the importance of claustrophobia to the serial’s plot. Ostensibly straightforward in its design, the title screen presents a series of still photographs of Eugénie (Valerie

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<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Kate Griffiths for drawing my attention to the relationship between television and claustrophobia, which she explores fruitfully in her chapter “*Chez Maupassant: The (In)visible Space of Television Adaptation*”, in Kate Griffiths and Andrew Watts, *Adapting Nineteenth-Century France: Literature in Film, Theatre, Television, Radio, and Print* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 143–71 (p. 149–51).

Gearon), the first of which shows her face in profile, the second the actress turned diagonally towards the camera, and the third her facing forwards. As the camera zooms out, this final portrait is shown to be contained within an elliptical border. At the same time as the frame widens, therefore, the space occupied by Eugénie appears to close around her, an effect underscored by her gaze, which in the last of the three photographs is fixed on a point outside the border, as if reflecting her desire to escape her current space and be elsewhere. The first sequence set in the Grandet household perpetuates this notion of claustrophobia in both literal and figurative terms. In the initial shot of this sequence, Tucker focuses on a bowl of fruit and a hand — subsequently revealed as belonging to Eugénie’s mother — reaching for an apple. As Madame Grandet realises that her husband is watching her, the camera cuts to a close-up of Grandet himself, whose disapproving stare quickly stifles her freedom to decide for herself what she eats, and prompts her to return the fruit to the bowl. The sense of confinement that Tucker establishes at the start of this short scene carries through the rest of the sequence, which calls attention to the lack of personal and emotional space that Eugénie and her mother are forced to endure. The director emphasises their feelings of suffocation in the subsequent arrival of the Cruchots and the Des Grassins, whose sons are competing for Eugénie’s hand in marriage. Anticipating the visit of the rival families, Nanon declares that “Mademoiselle Grandet will be married within the year, that’s certain” (Tucker, 1965-66), a statement that echoes Grandet’s own refusal to allow his daughter any latitude to make such decisions on her own account. In a further, physical invasion of Eugénie’s personal space, Monsieur de Bonfons arrives to present her with a bouquet of flowers, a birthday gift that he proves unable to bestow without lurching forwards and kissing Eugénie clumsily on the neck, causing her to turn away. As this sequence illustrates, Tucker exploits the conventions of his own medium to depict space in his version of *Eugénie Grandet* as narrow, restricted, and a privilege that is often denied.

The constricted aesthetic of television also provides a natural context in which to adapt *Eugénie Grandet*, given that the novel itself revolves around notions of claustrophobia. At the level of plot, Eugénie remains painfully aware of the confined nature of her provincial surroundings, a world that sometimes appears to be closing in on her. Such feelings are evident when Grandet orders his wife and daughter not to reveal to Charles that his father has committed suicide. On hearing this news, and prevented from consoling her cousin immediately, Eugénie’s sadness is so overwhelming that she feels suffocated: “‘Ah! maman, j’étouffe, s’écria Eugénie quand elle fut seule avec sa mère. Je n’ai jamais souffert ainsi.’ Mme Grandet, voyant sa fille pâlir, ouvrit la croisée et lui fit respirer le grand air.” (*CH*, III, p. 1084) Even as she gazes out of the windows of her home, Eugénie’s view appears restricted, as the narrative makes explicit when it describes her looking out towards “le jardin étroit et les hautes terrasses qui le dominaient ; vue mélancolique, bornée” (*CH*, III, p. 1074). This sense of spatial confinement becomes increasingly acute for Eugénie as the day of Charles’s departure approaches, and she begins to conceive of a world beyond her home in Saumur. “Elle pleurait souvent en se promenant dans ce jardin, maintenant trop étroit pour elle”, writes Balzac, “ainsi que la cour, la maison, la ville : elle s’élançait par avance sur la vaste étendue des mers” (*CH*, III, p. 1140). At the textual level, claustrophobia also appears as a key feature of Balzac’s creative praxis. In his 1833 preface to *Eugénie Grandet*, the author described himself as a specialist in representing the narrow, socially confined space of provincial France, a task that he saw as requiring “les finesses de la miniature antique” (*CH*, III, p. 1026). Finally, the popularity of *Eugénie Grandet* with nineteenth-century readers was such that Balzac admitted to feeling constrained artistically by his achievement, as critics continued to associate him

primarily with this novel, and in so doing neglected other works from *La Comédie humaine* that he considered equally worthy of attention. As Balzac's sister Laure Surville recalled him telling his family, "ceux qui m'appellent le père d'*Eugénie Grandet* veulent m'amoindrir ; c'est certainement un chef-d'œuvre, mais un petit chef-d'œuvre ; ils se gardent bien de citer les grands !" (1858, p. 99–100). Far from imposing a sense of claustrophobia on its source material, the BBC version of *Eugénie Grandet* reformulates the notions of spatial confinement that are embedded in the novel, and in Balzac's own feelings towards his work.

As well as playing on the claustrophobic resonance of the source text, Tucker's adaptation invites us to explore the spatial dynamics of Balzac's story, and in particular the role of the staircase in this domestic drama. Shots of and from the stairs are a recurring feature of this BBC serial. In a sequence early in episode 1, Grandet (Mark Dignam) is shown leaving the salon and climbing the stairs to his strongroom. The camera, positioned at the top of the staircase, tracks Grandet's progress across the landing before he lets himself into his private sanctum and descends another, smaller flight of stairs in order to reach his hoard of gold coins. In this short scene, these two sets of stairs form a maze-like route to the strongroom, with extradiegetic music used to build suspense as the viewer waits to discover what lies at the end of Grandet's journey to the upper floors of the property. However, Tucker does not employ the staircase merely to evoke a sense of mystery and anticipation; rather, he can be seen to use this domestic space as a means of engaging with the technical constraints of his medium. His emphasis on stairs in this adaptation reflects in particular the difficulty of working with heavy studio cameras, which in the 1960s remained large and difficult to manoeuvre. Consequently, most television dramas of this period were shot from a small number of relatively static camera positions, thus giving the action on screen the somewhat rigid feel of a stage play.<sup>10</sup> In recreating *Eugénie Grandet*, Tucker proved adept at working within these technical limitations, most notably by situating his camera at the top of the stairs at key junctures in the plot and using this elevated position to look down on the actors below. The director exploits this downwards perspective in the scene in which Charles arrives unannounced in Saumur. Barely raised above the height of the banister rail, Tucker's camera casts the viewer in the voyeuristic role of witness to the private drama that is about to unfold as Nanon rushes to open the door. Moreover, this elevated vantage point recalls the position of spectators in the theatre, who when seated above the level of the stalls look down towards the actors performing their roles on stage. In using the stairs to evoke this theatrical perspective, Tucker embraces the "staginess" that characterised television drama during the 1960s, and that underlies the source text itself. In Balzac's novel, the arrival of Charles appears as one of the most melodramatic moments in the plot, as the young man's loud knock suddenly interrupts the game of *loto* between the Grandets and their neighbours, and startles the women out of their seats.<sup>11</sup> By shooting Charles's entry into the Grandet household from the staircase, Tucker emphasises the theatricality of this pivotal moment in the story, reimagining it in a form that is both distinctly televisual and highly reminiscent of his Balzacian source.

Tucker's incorporation of the staircase into the *mise en scène* of his adaptation extends Balzac's own artistic interest in stairs in the source text. References to stairs abound in *Eugénie Grandet*. For Eugénie, Nanon, and Madame Grandet, the creaking sound of the old wooden steps serves as a warning signal that Grandet is approaching. As Eugénie experiences the first flush of love for her cousin, this same sound and the

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<sup>10</sup> See Cardwell, 2007, p. 185–86.

<sup>11</sup> See *CH*, III, p. 1053.



stairs that produce it acquire a happier, romantic resonance. “Cet escalier si souvent monté, descendu, où retentissait le moindre bruit”, writes Balzac, “semblait à Eugénie avoir perdu son caractère de vétusté ; elle le voyait lumineux, il parlait, il était jeune comme elle, jeune comme son amour auquel il servait” (*CH*, III, p. 1106). Among the most intriguing allusions to the stairs in this novel, however, are those that involve Grandet himself, and that associate his character with images of both climbing and descent. Balzac establishes such a connection early in the narrative when he shows Grandet repairing a rotten plank on his staircase as the Cruchots and the Des Grassins arrive to celebrate Eugénie’s birthday. On the one hand, Grandet’s determination to replace the step himself, after having allowed it to disintegrate almost entirely, presents a clear reflection of his avarice. On the other hand, the staircase evokes the social ascension that Grandet has achieved since beginning his working life as a cooper, an ascension that Balzac invites us to recall by describing his protagonist as whistling loudly “en souvenir de ses jeunes années” (*CH*, III, p. 1048).<sup>12</sup>

This reminder of Grandet’s social rise is counterbalanced later in the novel, however, by images of descent. As his wealth continues to grow, twice Grandet is shown hatching plans to swell his hoard as he makes his way downstairs, including a lucrative investment in government bonds: “Grandet descendait l’escalier en pensant à métamorphoser promptement ses écus parisiens en bon or et à son admirable spéculation des rentes sur l’État.” (*CH*, III, p. 1151) In juxtaposing Grandet’s voracious appetite for gold with the act of descending the stairs, Balzac adapts — perhaps unwittingly — one of his most consistent sources of artistic inspiration, namely Dante’s *Divina commedia*.<sup>13</sup> In the seventh canto of *Inferno*, Dante describes his descent to the fourth circle of Hell — Greed — in which the poet Virgil explains of those who reside there: “For all the gold that lies beneath the moon — or all that ever did lie there — would bring no respite to these worn-out souls” (2006, p. 61). Similarly, Balzac’s references to stairs metaphorise Grandet’s own downward spiral into a lust for gold that becomes ever more acute, and that ultimately remains unsatisfied even on his deathbed, when he attempts to grab the gilt crucifix held to his dying lips. In addition to being linked to social mobility and monetary obsession, the staircase in *Eugénie Grandet* thus appears as a site of intertextual connections which add new layers of depth, meaning, and resonance to Balzac’s narrative.

As well as inviting us to contemplate the representation of space in its source text, Tucker’s mini-series reflects on the process of resituating *Eugénie Grandet* within the social and cultural space of 1960s Britain. As some television critics observed when it was first broadcast in 1965–66, this serial presents a sometimes uneasy amalgam of British and French elements. Writing in *The Stage and Television Today* on 30 December 1965, Kari Anderson claimed that Tucker’s attempt to adapt Balzac for British television had resulted only in “melodramatic stodge” (1965, p. 10). Referencing an illustration by Giles, who in a 1964 cartoon published in *The Daily Express* had shown British sailors complaining about mixed nationality crews in the Royal Navy, Anderson derided the BBC version of *Eugénie Grandet* as “frogs’ legs and Yorkshire Pudding” (1965, p. 10). That the programme sparked such blistering criticism is perhaps unsurprising given that Tucker’s recreation of the novel sometimes appears incongruous

<sup>12</sup> On the historical realities behind Grandet’s social rise, see for example Pierre-Georges Castex, “L’ascension de Monsieur Grandet”, *Europe*, 429-30 (January-February 1965), p. 247–63.

<sup>13</sup> For a broader discussion of the artistic influence of Dante on Balzac, see for example René Guise, “Balzac et Dante”, *AB* 1963, p. 297–319. More recently, Anne-Marie Baron has revisited this topic in both *Balzac et la Bible : une herméneutique du romanesque* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007), p. 265–80 and “Dédicace et ‘autoexégèse’ : du nouveau sur Balzac et Dante”, in *Paratextes balzaciens : “La Comédie humaine” en ses marges*, ed. by Roland Le Huenen and Andrew Oliver (Toronto, Centre d’études du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle Joseph Sablé, 2007), p. 129–39.

with its French provincial setting, as evidenced in particular by the performance of Richard Beale as the gamekeeper Cornoiller, who speaks in an accent reminiscent of the English West Country. However, this serial can also be seen to engage more subtly with the time and place of its production, and, more specifically, with the economic context of Britain during the 1960s. As Mark Donnelly explains, this was a decade in which Britain finally emerged from the “age of austerity” that followed the Second World War. Rationing had ended in 1954, and in contrast to the shortages and restrictions of the 1940s and 50s, consumer goods now became more readily available. The effect of this shift, writes Donnelly, was that for some sections of the British population, the sixties were “less about sexual freedom and psychedelia and more about high-street spending” (2005, p. 29).

Tucker’s adaptation echoes this desire to leave behind the era of post-war austerity while also warning against living beyond one’s means. Expanding on a plotline to which Balzac alludes only fleetingly in the novel, episode 3 shows Madame des Grassins (Mary Kerridge) visiting Grandet — now partially paralysed by a stroke — to ask for a loan.<sup>14</sup> In a series of close-ups which metaphorise her feelings of financial constraint, the proud aristocrat pleads with Grandet to help bring an end to her own age of austerity, which she claims to have endured for two years since both her husband and son departed for Paris. Having agreed reluctantly to advance the funds, Grandet flies into a rage when he discovers that his neighbour is unable to pay interest, prompting Eugénie to escort her into the hallway before offering to arrange the loan herself. The desperation of Madame des Grassins to end her financial hardship resonates strongly with the context of 1960s Britain, when many viewers would have remembered only too vividly the economic constraints of the previous two decades. So, too, however, does her apparent eagerness to spend her loan on the trappings of wealth and social status that are available to her once again. When a carriage arrives later in the episode to collect Madame des Grassins from the Grandet house, Tucker encourages the audience to disapprove of this luxury, turning his camera to focus on another of the Cruchots, Mademoiselle de Gribeaucourt, as she exclaims “it’s a wonder she can afford a carriage!” (Tucker, 1965-66). By developing the sub-plot of Madame des Grassins’s loan, the BBC version of *Eugénie Grandet* can be seen to anchor itself in the social, cultural, and indeed economic space of 1960s Britain, reflecting the country’s push away from austerity, but also cautioning against financial over-indulgence and spending to satisfy one’s social vanity.

Tucker’s attempt to refit *Eugénie Grandet* for British television was bolstered by the BBC’s decision to broadcast this serial over the Christmas period, a scheduling which clearly invited viewers to compare Balzac’s story with Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843). By 1965, Dickens’s novella and its central protagonist Ebenezer Scrooge were well established in the cultural landscape of the British Christmas, a fact which owed much to the numerous adaptations that the tale had already inspired by this point. The BBC had long since mined the dramatic potential of *A Christmas Carol*, producing a television version in 1950, followed in 1951 by a radio adaptation starring Alec Guinness. A further recreation of the story, adapted by Charles Lefeaux, aired on BBC Radio on 25 December 1965, the same day as the second part of *Eugénie Grandet* was broadcast on BBC 2. The scheduling of Tucker’s serial can be seen to play on the similarities between the two stories. Like his fictional counterpart Scrooge, a figure

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<sup>14</sup> This sequence appears as a significant expansion of — and departure from — a brief moment in the source text in which Grandet expresses his sympathy for Madame des Grassins following her abandonment by her husband: “‘Votre mari n’a pas de bon sens, disait Grandet en prêtant une somme à Mme des Grassins, moyennant sûretés. Je vous plains beaucoup, vous êtes une bonne petite femme.’” (*CH*, III, p. 1145)

Dickens describes as a “tight-fisted hand at the grindstone” (2003, p. 34), Tucker’s Grandet appears as a ruthless miser. Adhering closely to Balzac’s portrayal of the character in the source text, the BBC serial shows Grandet rationing the supply of bread and candles in his home, refusing to light the fire before 1st November, and gloating over his gold in secret. However, just as Balzac sought to distinguish his realist novel from Molière’s comic satire *L’Avare*, Tucker emphasises the differences between his version of *Eugénie Grandet* and *A Christmas Carol*. Most notably, the BBC serial forcefully rejects the kind of moral redemption that Scrooge achieves in Dickens’s tale, and goes even further than Balzac in stressing that Eugénie has absorbed the miserly habits of her father. In contrast to the source text, in which the eponymous heroine partially redeems Grandet’s avarice by donating money to charitable causes, Tucker elides any such redemptive impulse in adaptation. Instead, the final sequence in his version of the story shows Eugénie following the same route up the stairs that Grandet had taken in episode 1, ending with a shot of her adding a purse of gold coins to her hoard and staring ahead in a moment of apparent realisation that she is repeating the avaricious behaviour of her father. While its scheduling encouraged viewers to associate this serial with Dickens, Tucker underscores that his work imitates neither *A Christmas Carol* nor *Eugénie Grandet*, but that it occupies a new artistic space in its own right.

Tucker’s ability to position his serial in relation to Balzac and Dickens provides further evidence of the inventiveness and originality of this mini-series. Clearly, scholars have been short-sighted when they have ignored television versions of Balzac. Far from spawning only second-rate imitations or mere recreations of the novelist’s work, television displays an intrinsic capacity to shed new light on *La Comédie humaine*. Tucker’s reimagining of *Eugénie Grandet* exposes this phenomenon with striking force. This three-part serial was produced during a period of growing public fascination with domestic drama. It introduced British television viewers to Balzac’s work for the first time and, more importantly, demonstrated the inherent suitability of his fiction to the small screen. In its representation of spatial confinement and constrictedness, Balzac’s novel loaned itself readily to a television aesthetic that revolved around the frequent use of close-ups and the relative absence of movement. In evoking the claustrophobic resonance of *Eugénie Grandet*, Tucker deliberately turned the technical constraints of his medium into strengths. His skilful deployment of a largely static camera amplifies the spatial dynamics of the source text, and in particular the representation of the staircase as a metaphor for both social advancement and monetary greed that can be linked to Balzac’s own artistic borrowings from Dante. Finally, the BBC version of *Eugénie Grandet* presents a compelling reflection of the social, cultural, and economic space of 1960s Britain. Through his willingness to manipulate and add to his source material in adaptation, Tucker invites his audience to align Balzac’s story with their own recent experience of austerity, and to tread a more careful line between avarice and over-spending than the fictional Eugénie, Madame des Grassins, or indeed Dickens’s Scrooge, prove capable of following. Contemplated through the lens of this BBC adaptation, television does not diminish or suffocate Balzac’s creativity, but creates a vibrant artistic space in which to view his work and television as a medium differently.

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