Introduction

John Glavin

A great deal that follows in this book is likely to seem not just strange but *very* strange to a reader who thinks that adaptation is supposed to copy an original reliably, transferring it to a new medium intact, and with respect. In this, the standard view, a good adaptation is good precisely because it gets a better source *right*. And here, just to be even-handed, is a strong argument for just that view, put with her usual eloquence and force by the novelist Fay Weldon, replying to my request for a preface.

Dear John,

Thank you for asking me to write your preface – I am flattered – but my problem is though good on Austen I am bad on Dickens. (I don't know why this antithesis occurs so naturally – she was born in 1775 and he in 1812, separated by nearly four decades: but I suppose in our heads Dickens and Austen both are just vaguely way back around then.) They made me read Mr. Pickwick at school, and I simply could not laugh. The book was illustrated – line drawings of corpulent men with pot bellies in tight waistcoats, which seemed not just outlandish but revolting. (This was in New Zealand: the old men I knew were skinny, gnarled pioneers.) I do admire that energy, that rolling prose, that Rushdie-ish freedom with language, at least when it's read aloud, but I simply cannot bear to read it myself. Thackeray I love: that smart, male, sophisticated man-about-town overview. Dickens's heart bled without stringency all over the place – though I do get on with his Household Narrative, the sheer accepting penny dreadfulness to which our own newspapers are fast returning. Nor do I think for a moment that Dickensian London was as he described it – Victor Hugo, born 1802, if we're on to comparisons, an equal gusher about the lives of the poor, got Paris more subtly, and at least had some reforming political zeal to add to the relish.

If life copies art – and it does (look how much worse the pea-soupers got after Monet with his eye cataract started painting the Thames, as Oscar Wilde pointed out) – I suppose it's going too far to blame Dickens for our descent from Georgian elegance, free-thinking and aspiration into messy Victorian sentimentality, but I am inclined to. I bet he had awful taste in furniture. Hans Christian Andersen (born 1805, there we go again) came from Copenhagen to stay and was such a difficult and neurotic house guest Mrs. Dickens longed for him to go away, and he never would, but at least he had the gift of parable. Search her husband's work for subtext and search for ever. Dickens turned London into a theme park long

before they were invented. Perhaps he had the gift of self-referential prophecy? You see how I am desperately looking for good things to say about this prolix writer?

As for watching Dickens on screen, I never do, not since being frightened out of my wits by Maggs in *David Copperfield* (was it?) when barely grown. I never watch adaptations on TV because of all that murky smog and grotesquerie, everyone over-acting and full of self-congratulation from the PR department to the producers to the set designers to the cast. I like coolness, elegance, control. Mind you, I only ever watch my own adaptations on screen, and no one, wisely, has even asked me to do Dickens, so I am not a reliable witness, just piqued at not having been the one asked to do it. Not that I would, even if asked – all that text. I turned *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, born 1814) into a stage play once and that nearly killed me.

Why was Thackeray (born 1811) so much more sparse? I think because he was a lazier man than Dickens: he started the monthly instalments of *Vanity Fair* only a couple of days before he was due to deliver them, and sent desperate notes to his friends to come round to dinner and brief him about life in India. He was discursive, the better to get his word-count in, but still in a hurry with deadlines looming. Whereas Dickens was ceaselessly busy and active, and hard-working. Jane Austen was lazy too – only six novels in twenty years of writing – perhaps that's why she's so curt and precise and economical. She just wanted to get it over with and go shopping. She might have speeded up if she'd lived longer, poor thing.

Walter Scott, Austen's contemporary (born 1773) is another writer I have a problem with: when a student I worked nights in a coffee shop to pay a friend to read them for me and explain them. His critical essays, on the other hand, and oddly enough, I relished. Dickens died at fifty-eight, Jane Austen at forty-one, Brontë at thirty-nine, Scott at sixty-one and Thackeray at fifty-two. Victor Hugo got to eighty-three and had a state funeral. I don't know why I tell you this except one begins to take it personally.

I never knew I thought all this until now. To dislike Dickens so actively is not a proper thing to admit in public. I don't think I am the right person for this job. Nor do I wish to belittle another writer in print, though he is dead. We must stick together, whatever our degree of decomposition, or how much down to bleached bone. Anything else I would be delighted to write for you. How are you getting on? When you're in London, please do drop by.

Best wishes

Fay

And here is my *resistant* response to her reply.

Dear Fay,

Thank you for providing so witty an anti-preface to what I hope its readers will find an equally unexpected, though scarcely so witty, book. I couldn't be more delighted. But I must say I believe you do yourself a serious injustice when you say you are "bad on Dickens." Nothing could be less true. You get him absolutely right. You say that you "do not think for a moment that Dickensian London was as he described it." You say "Dickens turned London into a theme park, long before they were invented." You say, perhaps to be fair, you suggest, "he had the gift of self-referential prophecy." Right on all three counts. What can you mean, then, by claiming you are bad on Dickens?

Of course, Dickens is "self-referential." His London is his invention, his triumphant invention, not a copy of a embedded, total reality but a thematic farrago designed to surprise and move an audience to pleasure and concern. What he called in a refreshingly pre-theoretical way: the romantic side of familiar things. The people who think of Dickens as a kind of verbal photogravure couldn't be more wrong. Dickens made up London, just as he made up life, because he couldn't bear the way it tended to be lived. *Your* Dickens then is right on the money. And so is your preface because it anticipates the recurring thesis of many if not most of the chapters that follow: that the best way to respond to Dickens's fiction is not with *mimesis*, but through and as *montage*.

I am deploying those terms here as they are contrasted by the Australian critic, Jonathan White – not New Zealand, I know, but close enough, I hope – to get at the difference between an older model of art, enunciated classically by Erich Auerbach, and a new model, supremely realized by film, and magisterially described by Sergei Eisenstein. For Auerbach, copy is all: "the serious realism of modern times cannot represent man otherwise than as embedded in a total reality, political, social, and economic, which is concrete and constantly evolving." But for Eisenstein, mimesis pales before "the new concept" made possible by montage: "two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition." And of course, as many of the chapters that follow point out (Bowen, Elliott, Stewart), it was the work of Dickens that Eisenstein, and other film pioneers, pointed to as the great predecessor and paradigm for what they thought the cinema was now able to achieve.

And so dear Fay, you see I knew I was right to ask you to do this. I couldn't ask for a more apt entry to the chapters that follow.

And now that the book is done, I am getting on very well, thank you very much for asking.

And of course when I am next in London I certainly intend to drop by, and I trust you will do the same the next time you are in DC.

Best wishes
John

Even after reading Fay Weldon's anti-preface and my response, you will, I trust, find much that follows surprising, and perhaps even scandalous. Particularly if, attached to the primacy of mimesis, you think a book on Dickens and screen ought to be (a) mostly about adaptations of Dickens's novels and (b) about how closely those adaptations copy those novels. This book, it should now be obvious, wears its Dickens with a difference. It assumes that:

because: film adaptation disrupts, rather than copies, fiction;
and because: by the end of the twentieth century, film had become the ground of fiction, all fiction, including fiction produced before the twentieth century;
it follows that: the Dickens film now shapes Dickens's fiction;
and it follows as well that: while film as montage may be deeply reflective of Dickens, most *Dickens* films aren't.

Which means that most of the chapters that follow celebrate discrepancies between the fictions and the films, and several don't treat what is recognizably a Dickens adaptation at all. To understand why, let me briefly strip out each of these propositions, one at a time.

Film adaptation disrupts, rather than copies, fiction. Alberto Farrasino describes writers and filmmakers as fellow travelers sharing the same boat but regularly trying to shove each other overboard. He is talking here about scriptwriters in the film industry jostling to hold their place against directors and producers. But the novelist and those who adapt a novel into film aren't even in the same boat. Film is not fiction by other means. People who care about film know that. And people who care about fiction should know it. Film has its own patterns and its own rhythms. They are primary and omnipotent. They depend on a medium which makes meaning only as it passes you by. You can't pause the film to reread several frames as you reread a passage. (I'm talking about film here, not video: film as it is intended to be screened.) You can't put the film down to ponder, as you do a book. You watch a film in a set period of duration, ninety minutes, generally, or two hours, rarely more. Even a brief novel is read over several days with intervals of lots of other activities in between. And when we watch a film, things are shown to us in place of words. But when we read a book, words are offered us in infinite displacement for the possibility of things. Film, then, is not fiction's copy but another, and by no means a parallel, universe. To make a good film, or indeed any sort of film, must mean inevitably to refuse, to disrupt, to subvert, the makings of fiction. We can even suggest a kind of counter-scale and claim that the more closely a film adaptation approaches its fictional predecessor the less it interests us as film.

Not only are film and fiction, then, by no means the same sort of thing, but *by the end of the twentieth century, film had become the ground of fiction, all fiction, including fiction produced before the twentieth century*. How can this be so? Here's the late critic and director Kenneth Tynan, as "smart, male and sophisticated" a "man-about-town" as even Fay Weldon's high standards could demand. In his diary entry for 19 October 1975, he observed that the "most powerful influence on the arts in the west is – the cinema. Novels, plays *and films* are filled with references to, quotations from, parodies of – old movies. They dominate the cultural subconscious." He isn't saying here what is obvious: that newer films rewrite older films. That *Gosford Park* is, at its best, but a shorn replica of Renoir's transcendent *The Rules of the Game*, or that Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous* is almost but not quite *The Apartment* of his idol Billy Wilder. Nor is he merely claiming that novels and plays today tend to be built like films; indeed, most are written in order to become, or in the

hope of becoming, films. Which came first, the *pulp* or the *fiction*? Tynan's making an even larger and perhaps more scandalous claim: that the way we think now is shaped – not by films (we watch far more television) – but by *film*, as the prime way of organizing and evaluating experience. As he presciently put it: "we have a civilization entirely molded by cinematic values and behavior patterns."

He doesn't specify those *values* and *patterns*. But if I had to (and at this point my hunch is I have to), I'd summarize them as follows. All life is Manichean. It has two sides, only two sides, and only one of those sides is right at any time. It is composed of and by affect. Sound thought should therefore always subordinate itself to strong feeling. Abstraction is irreal, because the real can always be seen, and must be felt. Lives thus invariably take the shape of efficient and affecting stories, in which nothing ambiguous or ambivalent should be tolerated. Anything that does not fit the tight arc of an unfolding narrative is extraneous, and therefore meaningless. Life moves, life changes, life goes somewhere. It always offers at least a second chance. The past is back in the day, amusing as nostalgia, but fundamentally irrelevant. A trap when it makes claims. All problems can be solved. All persons have agency. And while it is nice to be good, and good to be smart, it is best to be beautiful.

Insofar as you recognize this as the fundamental set of values and patterns of the world in which you operate (whether or not you share them) you can see how Tynan can claim that film shapes and evaluates the rest of our lives, even when we are looking at a pre-cinematic past. It's not the look of the past that we get from film. We have other sources for that. It's the script of the past that we get from film, the rules by which it is to be read.

Which leads us to this book's key thesis: that *the Dickens film now shapes Dickens's fiction*. Of course, Dickens's books *came* first (in time). They just don't come first (in meaning) any more. Baldly stated: all but specialists in Victorian fiction know Dickens's fiction primarily on and through the screen. I don't mean that most people are more likely to have seen *Great Expectations* than to have read it, though that is of course true. I mean, much more significantly and subversively, that if they do get around to reading *Great Expectations*, they will, and can, only see it as film, screened through what, following Tynan, I've outlined as the values and patterns of cinema. Remember: I am not talking about people who work in English departments, though I certainly hope that I am talking, *inter alia*, to them. For everybody outside of English departments, including most of the people who produce the adaptations, Dickens's fictions don't generate Dickens films. Just the reverse: it's those adaptations, for the big screen

and the small, that generate whatever possibilities remain for reading the fiction.

Of course, it is also true, as several of the chapters that follow argue, that Dickens – or at the very least an idea named Dickens – has in significant ways shaped film itself, not only the films that adapt his stories and novels, but the fundamental ways in which film characteristically arranges narrative and psychological pattern. Nevertheless, while *film as montage may be deeply reflective of Dickens, most Dickens films aren't*. Kenneth Tynan again seems to help us to get this just right. On 20 July 1972 his diary records that he was "certain that the full potential of the cinema will not be achieved until it concentrates on the development of *full-length cartoons*." He goes on to explain that "What the cinema ought to be doing (and to have done) is to present colored *images* of reality (or fantasy) designed by *artists*. At present – by using the camera merely to photograph *reality* [that is, to *copy* à la Auerbach] – it is confining itself to a function that is part newsreel and part photographed theatre. In pure cinema there would be no real actors and no real background" – just as, as Fay Weldon suggests, there are no *real* persons or places in Dickens. Tynan concludes: "Only thus will cinema achieve its historic mission of rising above and eventually replacing the novel." But there, of course, he falters. He should have said something like: Only thus will cinema achieve its historic mission of eventually matching Dickens's achievement. But in the meantime most (though thankfully not all) Dickens films are forced into the real-persons-in-real-places format that dominates feature-film syntax, but which has almost nothing to do with Dickens's pioneering imagining of high-colored, high-contrast montage.

The chapters that follow argue these ideas in much fuller, and certainly more persuasive, detail, from a wide variety of decentered and (happily) not entirely harmonious points of view. They are divided into four quite different parts. In the first section, a roundtable discussion among film critics, literary critics, and psychotherapists, led by the Victorian scholar Gerhard Joseph, heralds the book's wide-ranging exploration of connections between film, fiction, and culture, particularly the culture of Freudian and post-Freudian psychotherapy. This is followed by a second section in which literary critics, experts on Dickens's fiction, explore connections between the novels and film. But even here difference asserts itself, with para-Dickensian texts as unexpected as Alessandro Vescovi's discussion of Italian filmmaker Sergio Rubini's *La stazione*, Murray Baumgarten's comparison of two *Christmas Carol*s from the American comedian Bill Murray, or Robert M. Polhemus's reading of Dickens and Woody Allen as twin makers of screen dreams and *Stardust Memories*. Each of these emerges as much (or as little) a Dickensian film as the

more expected versions of *David Copperfield* analyzed by John Bowen or of *Great Expectations* explored by both Regina Barreca and John O. Jordan, though Jordan also does his Dickens with a difference. His *Great Expectations* is primarily the *untold* Australian variant.

In the third section individuals who have contributed to the Dickens film project, a screenwriter, John Romano, a director, Alfonso Cuaron (interviewed by Pam Katz), and an actor, Miriam Margolyes, describe the peculiar challenge and delight of co-creating with Dickens. In the fourth section, a group of experts in film criticism and film history situate what we can call the Dickens film project within the larger history of film through the twentieth century. These studies range from crucial revisions of the canonical connection between early film and Dickens's fiction by Kamilla Elliott and Garrett Stewart, to Steve J. Wurtzler's historical study of Dickens as a device of pedagogy, to Jeffrey Sconce's contrast of reverent and deeply irreverent adaptations for television, to important Dickens films that were never made (by Orson Welles, restored by Marguerite Rippy), or made from fiction Dickens never wrote (Tiny Tim on screen, rescaled by Martin Norden).

The book concludes with a selective filmography by Kate Watt and Kathleen Lonsdale to help the reader move from the pages of this book to the shelves of her or his video store.

Together these chapters make it clear how far *Dickens on Screen* ranges beyond the hundreds of filmed versions of Dickens's fiction. *Dickens on Screen* can never be a comprehensive account of its subject. There's been simply too much screened Dickens for that. But even a base camp to that towering archive has to include not only efforts to put Dickens on the screen but also equally important attempts to screen what merely claims to be Dickens; or what could not have been screened without Dickens; or what screens Dickens from what Dickens wrote, or meant; or what culture or power use in the name of Dickens to follow their own, and arguably un-Dickensian, ends; or what screens us, in the name of Dickens, from what we need to, or cannot bear to, see. Like the great man himself, screened Dickens is inexhaustible in the fecundity, the variety, the sheer inventedness of its infinitely expanding range of acknowledged and covert performance.

And now just three final warnings before I release you to the book itself. One: the book makes no distinction between film and television adaptations. Big screen, little screen, it's all, as Robert M. Polhemus says, screen dreaming. Two: the book tacitly assumes what may prove more rebarbative than any individual argument: that, although Dickens's novels are indisputably British, the *Dickens film* must be, largely, an American topic, since film is, largely, an American topic. And three: despite our

attempt at wide-ranging coverage, there's still missing, sadly, what Tynan rightly called for – a discussion of what I with others regard as the greatest, and certainly the most Dickensian, of the Dickens films, the many and brilliant Dickens cartoons. But perhaps it's just as well to end by pointing you to a guide for your own further research, argument and pleasure.

REFERENCES

You can't have a footnote to what is essentially a pair of letters, can you? But for clarity's sake let me add that I read the Tynan diaries in the 7 and 14 August 2000 issues of *The New Yorker*. And Jonathan White's juxtaposition of Auerbach and Eisenstein appears in chapter 6, "Mimesis or Montage? Reflections on the Languages of Literature and Cinema," of his *Italy: The Enduring Culture* (London: Continuum, 2000), 227–56. You'll find the Farrasino quote on page 1 of Millicent Marcus's *Filmmaking By the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

Part I

1 Dickens, psychoanalysis, and film: a roundtable

Gerhard Joseph

The Dickens novel, modern psychology, and film line up from past to present, with the Dickens novel of the mid-nineteenth century followed by the invention of psychoanalysis at century's end, followed in the twentieth century by the evolution of film and film theory. If (*pace* David Hume) we buy into a unidirectional thesis of past cause to present effect, we might then affirm that the earlier discourse may in some measure have affected the later. That is to say something like: the family structure within a Dickens novel is one of the primary determinants of modern psychological, or at any rate psychoanalytical, theory. (We remember that Freud named his famous Dora after David Copperfield's child bride.) And in turn, the Dickens novel and the psychological tradition initiated by Freud contributed in some combination or other to the technical, narrative and psychic structures of film, as Kamilla Elliott's and Garrett Stewart's chapters on Sergei Eisenstein and D. W. Griffith show.

Conversely, influence may be said to flow from present to past. The past is arguably always in some measure a back-formation of the present moment, a function of the present reader or viewer's "horizon of expectations," what Freud would call a "screen memory" writ large of something irrecoverable in full historical actuality. Thus, the way we nowadays read Dickens is crucially informed by classical psychoanalytic theory, Freudian, Jungian, Eriksonian, Lacanian, Kleinian, or Kohutian, to name a small sample. As to the back-formation of Dickens by film, can we ever again read *A Christmas Carol* without remembering Alastair Sim's wide-eyed comic terror, or re-encounter Sikes murdering Nancy without envisioning David Lean's projection of her brutal end, the horrified dog frantically yowling and scratching at the closed door?

Or we can ignore thinking of historical connections running in either direction, and think instead of synchronic, theoretical links that have nothing to do with temporal sequence or influence. We can, that is, try to calibrate the conceptual analogues, the similarities and differences among the three areas, Dickens, psychoanalysis, and film, with respect to such matters as how stories of lives begin and end, how narrative continuities