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Communal Connections in Cinematic Adaptations of Great Expectations

Abstract. — Twentieth-century cinematic transfers of *Great Expectations* have tended to turn Dickens's *bildungsroman* to larger nationalist purposes. My paper looks at the representation of the individual's relationship to community in two twentieth-century film adaptations of *Great Expectations*: *An Orphan's Tragedy* (1955) and *Mr. Pip* (2012), the latter film being adapted from the Lloyd Jones novel of the same title.

Filmed in Hong Kong and starring Bruce Lee as young Frank (the Pip figure), *An Orphan's Tragedy* offers a reading of its source text as a critical commentary on social inequality under Western capitalism. As a Western writer, Dickens was regarded with suspicion in post-revolutionary China, but *An Orphan's Tragedy* recuperates *Great Expectations* as a realist text that endorses communal service over individual self-interest, an anti-capitalist message in line with China's communist ideology.

New Zealand novelist Lloyd Jones's novel *Mr. Pip* is an object lesson in adaptation—how active readerly engagement transforms static texts into portable cultural property. Adamson's film adaptation, also entitled *Mr. Pip*, refines that message, exploring how adaptations make literary texts available for individual and communal appropriation. The film demonstrates an active form of literacy that gives readers access to literary texts as structures with which they can frame their own life experiences and understand their cultural histories. In the process Matilda finds herself torn between different communities, the community of Dickens readers and the community in which she has been raised. Where Jones ends his novel ambiguously, Adamson offers more concrete evidence that Matilda ultimately manages to reconnect her adopted readerly community with the community of her birth.

Keywords. — Dickens, cinema, adaptation, *Mr. Pip*, *An Orphan's Tragedy*.

About The Author

Marty Gould is Associate Professor of English at the University of South Florida. He is the author of *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and the Imperial Encounter* (Routledge, 2011). His current project, funded by a Marie Curie International Fellowship, investigates adaptations of Dickens's work on both stage and screen. This paper is taken from a longer essay on Dickens and global cinema, prepared for the forthcoming volume, *Charles Dickens and the Arts*, edited by Juliet John.

Communal Connections in Cinematic Adaptations of Great Expectations

The cinema has played an important role in making Dickens a modern, globally recognizable cultural icon. By reshaping his texts to fit various readerships and cultural contexts, the international film industry has put Dickens's major novels into motion, giving his characters and plots an ever-expanding global circulation. In South Africa, Hong Kong, New Zealand and India, screenwriters and directors have employed Dickens in films that reflect and comment upon emerging political and cultural flashpoints. Modern film productions in—and beyond—Britain and its former colonies demonstrate how the work of Dickens—a quintessentially 'British' writer of the nineteenth century—can be appropriated and reconfigured to speak to other cultural contexts and for a wide array of modern social and political purposes.

Beyond the Hollywood film industry, cinematic transfers of *Great Expectations* have tended to turn Dickens's *bildungsroman* to larger nationalist purposes. A story of identity and development, of desired and unwanted affiliations, of grappling with the traumatic legacies of the past and of forging a new future, *Great Expectations* is teeming with potential political resonance, particularly for countries that grew up under the influence of colonialism. And many filmmakers have seized the opportunity to capitalize on the novel's latent political potentials by resetting it within new cultural and political contexts. Thus, I want to look briefly at two rather different cinematic renderings of *Great Expectations—An Orphan's Tragedy* (filmed and released in Hong Kong in 1955), and *Mr. Pip* (filmed and released in New Zealand in 2012). These two films feature very different cultural transpositions of *Great Expectations* yet share an

impulse to link their protagonists' stories of self-discovery and development to larger issues of community affiliation and of the individual's responsibility to others.

Although it does not overtly signal its debt to Dickens, Gu Xin Xue Li's *An Orphan's Tragedy* is unmistakably adapted from *Great Expectations*. Filmed in Hong Kong in 1955 and starring Bruce Lee as young Frank (the film's Pip figure), *An Orphan's Tragedy* offers a reading of its source text as a critical commentary on social inequality under Western capitalism. Some critics have lamented this film's substitution of simplistic melodramatic villainy and goodness for more complex and nuanced characterizations, but we may read its deployment of easily recognizable types as an attempt to bring the film into line with the conventions of nineteenth-century stage melodrama. It is, certainly, a film with a clear moral message.

Even if they had never read the novel that inspired it, the initial audiences of Ji Zhu's film might have recognized the story from David Lean's iconic 1946 *Great Expectations*, which had been shown in Hong Kong in 1948 followed by the publication of a 'book of the film' in Chinese. (Fonoroff, 2013; Hammond, 2015: 168) The film's opening scene—which shows a lost woman collapsing on the street before giving birth and then dying—is most certainly borrowed from David Lean's film of *Oliver Twist* (1948), providing further evidence that *An Orphan's Tragedy* engages Dickens by way of cinematic intermediaries that may, in fact, form its own audiences' primary means of accessing Western literature. So if *An Orphan's Tragedy* reads Dickens via David Lean's films, this may be because its Chinese audience was doing this as well.

An Orphan's Tragedy presents a distinctly non-Western, socialist reading of *Great Expectations*, a reading that emphasizes its protagonist's relationship with—and responsibility to—his community. From some perspectives, this is a somewhat surprising reading of Dickens's original text, though it does suggest the novel's availability for appropriation beyond its Victorian context and of Dickens's readiness to be redirected to speak to non-western, non-capitalist societies.

The novel's Pip becomes the film's Frank, born an orphan and raised by the village blacksmith. Alone in the forest at night, Frank encounters an escaped convict, Dickson Fan, who quickly realizes that Frank is his lost son. Without divulging their relationship, Fan advises Frank to go to school to study medicine so that he can help the poor. Frank laments he has no money for

school, and this lays the groundwork for Fan's efforts to become the boy's secret supporter. So here we have the escaped convict who becomes the boy's secret benefactor, with the twist that he is also the boy's biological father. It is also significant that Fan is the one who inspires Frank's dream of becoming a doctor: it is his father who sets him on this path, and later it will be his father who will help Frank understand just what it means to be a good doctor.

Years later, having received a scholarship sponsored by an anonymous donor, Frank goes to the city in search of an education. Everyone believes Dr. Toh, the director of the local hospital, must be Frank's mysterious patron, that his generous support meant to transform Frank into a suitable match for his daughter, Rainbow. In the end, Dr. Toh's offer to set Frank up as the manager of a pharmacy in the city turns out to be the evil doctor's plot to entangle an unwitting Frank in a scheme involving the sale of counterfeit medicines. When this plot is discovered, Frank's long-lost father Fan returns to challenge Dr. Toh. The two fight, and Toh is killed. Fan dies in Frank's arms as the screen fades to black.

Where readers of Dickens expect to find Miss Havisham we encounter, instead, Dr. Toh, whose villainous scheme to sell counterfeit drugs has increased his wealth while endangering the health of the local population.There is nothing subtle about Dr. Toh: he is every inch the melodramatic villain, scheming, lying, surrounded by spies and toadies. Unlike Miss Havisham, Dr. Toh presents us with no psychological mystery, no chilling backstory, no gothic darkness. He is a straightforward cinematic baddie whose only motives seem to be the eradication of his enemy, the amassing of more wealth, and the consolidation of his personal power. (Fonoroff, 2013) Toh's great crime—the selling of counterfeit drugs—demonstrates the evils of capitalism, a system that reduces everything to a commercial exchange, the only goal of which is the making of profit, even at the expense of human life. Wearing traditional robes, Dr. Toh represents old China and the social ills that were swept away by the Revolution, while Frank comes to understand that truly great doctors don't just treat the privileged few: they serve everyone. This message is explicitly stated by Fan when he returns to find Frank working in Dr. Toh's pharmacy. Fan repeats this message with his dying breath: lying in Frank's arms, Fan asks his son one final question: What is a good doctor? Frank answers that a good doctor serves all people in the community. Hearing that his son has learned this most valuable lesson, Fan dies, leaving Frank to

fulfill his destiny and bring skilled medical care to his rural community. Also, apparently, to marry Polly, the film's version of Biddy, a sweet village girl who spends much of the film singing about the virtues of hard work.

In Dickens's novel the criminals are forgers of documents; in *An Orphan's Tragedy*, the villain is a forger of medicines. In both cases forgery—the illicit creation of a counterfeit object—stands in opposition to the forge of the blacksmith, the man who acts as a substitute father for the orphaned protagonist and whose hands create only solidly real objects. So, we have juxtaposed in this film two worlds—the world of the real and the world of the fake; of authenticity and of artifice. And though the forge and the village where Frank grows up are very much the center of honesty and moral goodness, it is the flashier, utterly false world of Dr. Toh and Rainbow that seduces Frank and leads him astray.

Fan's plan to support Frank financially so that he can go to school is more than paternal support. Fan wants his son to become a great doctor who will compete with Dr. Toh. The film balances the convict's affection for the young boy with his desire to get revenge against the man who betrayed him and sent him to prison. Frank's adoptive grandfather, too, decides that Frank must become a great doctor in order to defeat Dr. Toh and bring justice to the town. And so, the film unites the boy's two father figures in a shared vision for the boy's future that also entails the vanquishing of the villain.

The villain's destruction comes at the end of the film, in a subtle cinematic citation. The mob's assault on Dr. Toh's pharmacy recalls the 1931 film of *Frankenstein* and its scenes of torch-wielding villagers determined to destroy the monster and the man who made him. At first the mob is set to have its revenge on Frank, whom they believe to be the source of the fake medicines, but later are persuaded to challenge Dr. Toh as the real author of the evil. On one level this subtle cinematic citation serves to enhance the general gothic atmosphere of *An Orphan's Tragedy* by recalling an earlier 'classic' gothic film. But the invocation of *Frankenstein* is particularly apt as it shows an understanding of the relationship which Mary Shelley's novel bears to *Great Expectations*: Pip is a creature 'made' by the hands of others, and he struggles to come to come to terms with his place in someone else's design.

As a Western writer, Dickens was regarded with suspicion in post-revolutionary China, but some Chinese critics recuperated him by citing his working-class sympathies and critical view of the injustices of capitalism. Though he was a reformist rather than a revolutionary, Dickens was suitably progressive, his works containing cultural critiques and ideological inclinations that made them potentially appropriate to post-Revolutionary China. When David Lean's *Great Expectations* was screened in China, the press called attention to the film's exposure of the cruelty and selfishness of the upper classes and the elusiveness of love and happiness under Western capitalism. (Guo, 2011: 802) *An Orphan's Tragedy* takes that anti-capitalist reading of Dickens to the next level. The film recuperates *Great Expectations* as a text that endorses communal service over individual self-interest, an anti-capitalist message in line with China's communist ideology. (Guo, 2011: 799) What makes Dr. Toh truly villainous is his utter disregard for the well-being of others. His greedy pursuit of wealth leads him to traffic in fake medicines, and for this scheme to work he needs a young doctor like Frank to serve as frontman and to take the fall when the scheme is uncovered. And that means removing Frank from the village, cutting him off from the solid moral center that community provides. When Frank is reminded that medicine is all about serving other people and that the best doctors serve those with the greatest need, he is saved, and the film closes on this message about the individual's responsibility to his community.

New Zealand novelist Lloyd Jones's novel *Mr. Pip* is a story about how characters become a part of our cultural memory and how our experiences are filtered through the texts we share. (Maack, 2009) If Jones's novel is an object lesson in adaptation—how active readerly engagement transforms static texts into portable cultural property—director Andrew Adamson's 2012 film adaptation, also entitled *Mr. Pip*, refines that message, by taking Jones's novel and Dickens's *Great Expectations* as raw materials from which it constructs something new, something that engages with but does not seek fully to reproduce—its narrative sources and cinematic predecessors. (Schiller, 2012: 94-8; Gribble, 2009: 186-7)

Mr. Pip is set on Bougainville, a South Pacific island ravaged by a civil war. To provide more normal structure for the children of the community, the island's lone remaining white man, Mr. Watts, reopens the abandoned school. As part of his lessons, Mr. Watts introduces the

children to *Great Expectations*, reading to them a portion each day. Matilda, the novel's narrator and protagonist, is especially receptive to the novel, and she feels that it offers her a way of connecting to Victorian England—a world far away and unlike her own. This escapist impulse makes Matilda's mother uneasy, in part because she fears that this book—unlike the Bible—is full of immoral suggestions and is not to be trusted. She also worries that her daughter will lose her connection to the real world—to her island and her village—through a desire to be part of a foreign, and fictional, world.

The novel is destroyed in a fire, and Mr. Watts sets the children the task of recreating it. Together, the children rewrite the book from their collective memory of it, filling in the gaps with phrases and images they collect from their everyday lives. The result is a communally authored, South Pacific version of *Great Expectations*. Mr. Watts and Dolores are eventually killed by rebel soldiers, and Matilda escapes from the chaos of the island. Ultimately, she travels to Britain and pursues a degree in English, immersing herself in the professional study of Dickens. Here, the adaptation departs from its original text, for the film offers a more certain resolution than we find in Jones's novel. Where Jones leaves open the question of whether Matilda manages to return home, succeeding where Pip had failed, the film closes on a picture of Matilda, with her father, walking along Bougainville's beach, near the spot where her shrine to Pip—the inscription that caused so much trouble for her and her village—had stood. The film thus fixes both its original texts, offering a recuperative closure—the protagonist's successful return home—that they withhold. In this closing image of Matilda, as a teacher, on the island, the film offers the possibility for reintegration into the community that the protagonist has left behind. But Matilda does not simply return to live on Bougainville: like Frank in *An Orphan's Tragedy*, who becomes a doctor who will serve his whole community, Matilda returns to her village in the role of teacher, prepared to help rebuild the community and to connect it with the wider world, using the knowledge and the tools she acquired abroad. Dickens is not simply her means of escaping Bougainville: he becomes the conduit for her return and the cornerstone of the lessons she will teach to a new generation of children on the island. If Jones's novel concludes with an image of Matilda alone and isolated from any community, Adamson's film closes on the image of communal reintegration.

Mr. Pip explores how adaptations make literary texts available for individual and communal appropriation. The film demonstrates an active form of literacy that gives readers access to literary texts as structures with which they can frame their own life experiences and understand their cultural histories. Matilda and her classmates have access to *Great Expectations* indirectly, first through Mr. Watts's abbreviated and altered version and then via their own recreation of the lost text. It is this multiply adapted, multiply recreated story that grabs imaginative hold over Matilda and that ultimately offers her—in the film—means first to escape and then to return, forming and reforming herself in the process. An adaptation of an adaptation, *Mr. Pip* alters its own immediate source text in order to address the criticisms Postcolonial critics have leveled against Jones's novel which, they say, reinscribes the hegemony of the white, western literary canon. Moreover, while Jones's novel casts the nonwhite girl in the role of narrator, she imagines herself as Pip, imagines herself in the guise of the white male protagonist of the traditional *bildungsroman*.

Adamson's film tries to wrest a bit more space for Matilda and to give her something more of her own voice, for in this film, Mr. Watts does not get a chance to tell the rebels his version of *Great Expectations*. In Jones's novel, he is given several nights over which to tell this story, which interweaves pieces of his own biography and Dickens's narrative. In the film, as soon as he begins his tale, reciting the opening lines to *Great Expectations*, 'I called myself Pip and came to be called Pip', Mr. Watts is shot dead by the army leader, who says 'I am tired of this'. Tired of what, we may ask. Mr. Watts's lies? The endless stall tactics? The obsessive adaptive return to Dickens? Possibly. Or possibly this man is tired—as the film is tired—of the self-obsession of *Great Expectations*'s first-person narrative: '**My** father's family name being Pirrip, and **my** Christian name Philip, **my** infant tongue cold make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So **I** called **myself** Pip, and came to be called Pip' [emphasis mine]. The emphasis in this opening paragraph is entirely on the narrator's voice and identity, an individualistic focus that also brings the novel to a close: '**I** saw the shadow of no parting from her'. By making the original novel's opening articulation of individual identity a violent moment and by ending with Matilda's return to the island, Adamson's film gestures towards the importance of one's ties to community. The film dispatches the white man who would

appropriate the black girl's story: Mr. Watts is killed, leaving space for Matilda to become the community's storyteller and teacher.

Interweaving British literature with local folklore and her own personal history, the film's Matilda becomes the emblem for a heterogeneous globalized identity that displaces the traditional center-periphery binary of postcolonialism. (Schiller, 2012: 98) In this way, *Great Expectations* becomes a liberating fiction, transportable and adaptable to multiple cultural environments, the raw material for forging new narratives that address emerging social challenges in diverse locations.

An Orphan's Tragedy and *Mr. Pip* are of course, two quite different films, produced at very different historical moments and in—and for—very different social settings, and yet they both manage to reread—indeed, to redirect—*Great Expectations* in ways that prove Dickens's relevance and appropriability across media, allowing the Victorian writer to speak in a voice both new and familiar to a wide variety of cultural communities and political contexts.

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