Fumbling Toward Narrative?: Charles Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836-39) in the Literature-Film Adaptation Course

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In an article in the November 2015 number of *The CEA Critic* ("Apples to Apples: A Book-History Approach to Film Adaptations in the Classroom"), I modeled an approach to teaching film that "can bring film and literature together in mutually illuminating ways" (Jackson 296). I argued then for a "book-history lens for teaching adaptation," averring that an insistence on "the *materiality* of literary texts" and the notion that a "book is a medium" raises the possibilities that a literary text is always *already* adapted into a "material, visual instantiatio[n]" and that "the challenges and problems posed by the process" of adapting literature to film "are, to a large degree, anticipated by and inscribed in the literary work's textual history" (Jackson 295-296).

In this essay, I discuss my use of Charles Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836-39) in my undergraduate Victorian literature and film class as a further way of expanding the possibilities for teaching film with literature. Dickens's first published book, *Sketches by Boz*, First Series (1836) is an anthology of essays, articles, journalistic ephemera, and short stories Dickens wrote as early as 1833 for such periodicals as the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Monthly Magazine*, the *Carlton Chronicle*, and *Bell's Weekly Magazine* during his uncertain early years of parliamentary reporting and other journalism. Publisher John Macrone reissued Dickens's early writings (along with assorted original pieces written strictly for *Sketches*) in two volumes accompanied by new illustrations by renowned illustrator and caricaturist George Cruikshank. Sales and reviews were

encouraging enough to lead to a "Second Series" of *Sketches by Boz*, a republishing of further pieces by Dickens, appearing in 1837, and both series were ultimately collated and reissued as the one-volume *Sketches by Boz*, "New Edition, Complete" in 1839. *Sketches'*s unfamiliarity to my students and its very strangeness as a book has the effect of destabilizing assumptions they might bring to a literature and film course. I begin my class by assigning various selections from *Sketches*, though its content has never been filmed: this alone signals from the outset that the course will not be based exclusively on a series of book-vs-adaptation comparisons. More importantly, however, I have found that *Sketches by Boz* in a film and literature course can provide a useful way of introducing students to film's early history and discussing the issues it raises. As Dickens's first book, *Sketches by Boz* has long been seen as marking his ascension to full-time professional authorship even as it anticipates the famous novels that would follow. As Dickens's friend John Forster would write of *Sketches*, "[T]he first sprightly runnings of [Dickens's] genius" are apparent, even if his later works would have "so much more perfect form and fullness" (76). In my class, I like to stress how, to me, the tentative, uneven process by which Dickens's fragmentary journalistic sketches of the 1830s yielded to the full-length, sprawling novels for which he is famous furnishes a useful analogue to the process by which the early, fragmentary, non-narrative film entertainments of the 1890s would yield to such narrative works as *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*) (1902) and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), initially, and, later, the feature-length narrative films of D. W. Griffith—analogous historical arcs I like to call "fumbling toward narrative." Generically indeterminate and often *meta*narrative while straddling the material formats of periodical journalism and published

books, Dickens's *Sketches* sets us up as a class for conversations about genre, narrative, and material media—ultimately allowing us to question the desirability of narrative in literature or in film.

I begin this essay with a general discussion of Dickens's overall value to my idea of the Victorian literature and film class, giving particular attention to *Sketches by Boz*. From there, I stress *Sketches'*s status as an illustrated book that frequently expresses a visual methodology, one arguably prophetic of the cinematic camera. My next section details how we read *Sketches* while viewing key examples of early film to explore this process I call "fumbling toward narrative." I end that section by discussing how I see *Sketches by Boz* as a transition to our class's first novel, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39). I conclude by suggesting how starting with *Sketches* ultimately allows me to challenge the idea of narrative itself while positing pre-narrative cinema as a road-not-taken.

Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, and "The Amusements of the People"

Dickens has long been considered important to adaptation studies and literature-film courses focused on Victorian or British literature given how elements not only of his work but also of his fame and stature can be deemed *proto*cinematic. Juliet John writes that Dickens's "popular and commercial appeal was consciously engineered to exploit the possibilities of mechanical production in the 'first age of mass culture'" (14)—the type of insight valuable in a literature-film course insofar as it challenges ingrained assumptions about high culture versus mass culture. In his seminal essay "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today," Russian filmmaker

and theorist Sergei Eisenstein writes, "What were Dickens's novels, for their time? There is one answer: they bore the same relationship to them that the film bears to the same strata in our time" (206).

In class, we spend time unpacking these assertions. Indeed, Dickens's own well-documented immersion in and enthusiasm for popular entertainments, what he dubbed in an eponymous essay in the 30 March 1850 issue of *Household Words* "The Amusements of the People," allows me to frame for my students not only that film, the technology of the moving image, was a Victorian invention,[1] but moreover that it emerged from a whole milieu of mass culture attractions and diversions, a world of popular entertainments dedicated to *visual mimesis* and, increasingly, *narrative*. Thus, Michael Chanan notes that cinema "descended from the peep shows and panoramas, magic lanterns and dioramas of the nineteenth century" (12). Such "cultural forms," as he calls them, "shaped the first films and created a dominant series of attitudes and expectations which audiences brought with them when they came to see them" (17).

We spend time as a class discussing and examining key protocinematic entertainments and technologies, drawing on valuable studies such as Richard D. Altick's, Martin Meisel's, and Chanan's for background. We cover such examples as the panorama, a public attraction that offered its patrons a vast, realistic painting spanning a circular room. The innovation of Scottish artist Robert Barker in 1788 (Altick 128), the panorama offered "a group of spectators, surrounded by a 360˚ painting, the sensation of being present within the scene depicted" (Chanan 115).[2] Burford's Panorama opened to the public in Leicester Square in 1794, where naval and

military subjects quickly proved the most popular offerings, making the panorama what Altick calls "the newsreels of the Napoleonic era" (136). Almost from their inception, panoramas were criticized for their lack of motion, and the format would soon feature panoramic canvases mounted on rollers to create an illusion of movement.

With the diorama, meanwhile, we have a similar example of "scenic illusionism [that] carried the representation of reality to yet another stage" (Smith 32). It was first developed in Paris by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (indicatively, the inventor of the daguerreotype, the important milestone in photography) in 1822 and brought to London shortly thereafter. With the nineteenth-century diorama, patrons were led into a dark amphitheater to sit facing a large painting ("with an illusion of depth") (Altick 163) on partly translucent lawn or calico. From there, additional transparent canvases and complicated lighting changes in front of and behind the translucent canvas produced the diorama's "dynamic effects" (163). Students of mine invariably note how the notion of seated spectators facing a proscenium in a darkened auditorium anticipates modern-day filmgoing.

We pay particular attention to *the magic lantern* as an important protocinematic technology. A concept dating back to the seventeenth century, the magic lantern "employed a lens and lamp to project [an] image on a slide on to a screen" (Chanan 13). By the nineteenth century, the magic lantern had become technologically sophisticated enough to realize its full potential as a medium of visual, *narrative* entertainment. In her study, Joss Marsh identifies two major goals among magic lanternists: "The first … was to make still images move … The second … was to tell stories in pictures, combining projected images with dramatic readings—not only

fairy tales, Ali Baba and the Arabian Nights, Bible stories, and *Robinson Crusoe*, but modern stories, and stories written specially for the lantern" (333). Offering in its apotheosis sustained stories told through moving pictures, a "visit to the magic lantern show may have generated all the pleasures associated by film goers at the thought of a night at the pictures," Grahame Smith writes (24). For Marsh, Dickens—a magic-lantern enthusiast since his childhood—was "the dominant literary source for later Victorian magic lantern story-telling, uniquely important for lantern history, as he is for cinema" (336). She insists that "it is … by way of the magic lantern that cinema reveals itself as descended from Charles Dickens. Indeed, Dickens is 'cinematic' only and insofar as he responded to pre-cinematic technologies and popular entertainments" (336).

In the classroom, *Sketches by Boz* can provide documentary evidence of the popular entertainments of 1830s London. Much of *Sketches* reads as a first-person, peripatetic tour of what a titular sketch dubs "London Recreations." As an anthology, *Sketches* foregrounds and celebrates the sheer variety of available urban amusements. It takes inspiration from the miscellany of entertainments promised by the penny theatricals at the South Bank's Greenwich Fair: "a melo-drama (with three murders and a ghost), a pantomime, a comic song, an overture, and some incidental music, all done in five-and-twenty minutes" (Dickens, *Sketches* 141). In addition to these "allurements" (Dickens, *Sketches* 137), the sketch "Greenwich Fair" surveys "the travelling menageries" (143) and sundry "natural curiosities": "a giantess, a living skeleton, a wild Indian, [and] 'a young lady of singular beauty, with perfectly white hair and pink eyes'" (143). A note of nostalgia permeates his sketch on the unpretentious pleasures of Astley's

Equestrian Amphitheater, a site that "specialized in melodramatic spectacles into which horses were introduced" (Walder, Notes 598n1):

> there is no place which recalls so strongly our recollections of childhood as Astley's … [T]he whole character of the place was the same, the pieces were the same, the clown's jokes were the same, the riding-masters were equally grand, the comic performers equally witty, the tragedians equally hoarse, and the "highly-trained chargers" equally spirited. Astley's has altered for the better—we have changed for the worse. Our histrionic taste is gone[.] (129)

Indicatively, Sketches highlights the city's specifically protocinematic entertainments. Thus, "Greenwich Fair" mentions "Mr. Horner … of Colosseum notoriety" (139): the reference is to artist Thomas Horner, whose brainchild was the Colosseum, a vast panorama featuring Horner's famous canvas of "London and its environs as they would be seen for twenty miles in all directions" from the top of St. Paul's Cathedral (Altick 149).

Using *Sketches by Boz* to shed light on the milieu of Victorian popular entertainment sets in motion semester-long discussions about the many ways film remains a Victorian invention. As mentioned earlier, resituating Dickens in this world challenges long-standing perceived hierarchies involving canonical literature and popular, chiefly visual entertainment. In the section that follows, I discuss how *Sketches* can also be used in my idea of an adaptation course to question perceived ideas about words' primacy and superiority to the image, another hierarchy that has long upheld "the axiomatic superiority of literature to film" (Stam 58).[3]

"[L]ittle Pictures of Life"

In the re-issuing of Dickens's early journalism and assorted short fiction in volume form, George Cruikshank's illustrations were of foundational importance. John Sutherland, in his study of John Macrone, the publisher and projector of *Sketches by Boz*, notes that Macrone began his career as a partner of one James Cochrane, who "specialized in illustrated books and had brought out in 1831-33 the 'Novelist's Library' … featuring novels by Fielding and Goldsmith, illustrated by George Cruikshank" (245). From this earlier experience, "[i]t must have struck the young Macrone" of *Sketches*'s genesis "that Cruikshank's skill might usefully be applied to enhance … a painter of the contemporary scene, like Dickens" (245). In class, I make a point of assigning the Penguin edition of *Sketches* edited by Dennis Walder. Not only does it include all of Cruikshank's original illustrations, but it also provides such useful paratexts as the "Preface to the First Edition of the First Series," which finds Dickens as Boz writing,

> Entertaining no inconsiderable feeling of trepidation at the idea of making so perilous a voyage in so frail a machine, alone and unaccompanied, the Author was naturally desirous to secure the assistance and companionship of some well-known individual, who had frequently contributed to the success, though his well-earned reputation rendered it impossible for him ever to have shared the hazard, of similar undertakings. To whom, as possessing the requisite in an eminent degree, could he apply but to George Cruikshank? (7)

The Penguin edition also allows us to inspect a facsimile of the 1839 edition's title page to consider whose name has real prominence in "Sketches by Boz / Illustrative of Every-Day Life

and Every-Day People / with Forty Illustrations / By / George Cruikshank" (Dickens, *Sketches* [5]): the pseudonymous author or the *named* illustrator? Smith has written that Dickens's novels, all but one of which first appeared with illustrations, "offer themselves as a mixed media experience in which the visual aspect … is certainly part of the package" (6). In the case of *Sketches*, the degree to which Cruikshank's illustrations were germinal to the whole project disrupts assumptions about the primacy of *the Word*. Here, "In the beginning was the Image."

Fittingly as an illustrated book, *Sketches* repeatedly deploys a *visual* vocabulary in defining its aims. The book's subtitle defines the collective sketches as "*Illustrative* of Every-Day Life and Every-Day People" ([5], emphasis added). In the "Preface to the First Edition of the First Series," Dickens declares that the work's "object has been to present *little pictures* of life and manners as they really are" (7, emphasis added). The majority of the sketches evince a visual epistemology, insofar as they employ an unnamed first-person narrator ("Boz," ostensibly), whose observations of London scenes, characters, and institutions comprise the sketch. Thus, the sketch "Omnibuses" sees its narrator explaining how he is frequently drawn to "public conveyances" in that they "afford an extensive field for amusement and *observation*" (166, emphasis added). *Sketches'*s narrator relies on keen observation to make sense of and to depict London-based people and places. In "The Parlour Orator," he observes a particularly rich specimen of the title "type" and so as "to hold a pattern one up, to know the others by, we took his likeness at once, and put him in here. And that is the reason why we have written this paper" (277). Here, "took his likeness" anticipates *Oliver Twist*, with Mrs. Bedwin's folksy reference to

the camera as "the machine for taking likenesses" (90). The sketch "Criminal Courts," meanwhile, fairly exhorts its readers to visualize—to see—the scene unfolding:

> Turn your eyes to the dock; watch the prisoner attentively for a few moments, and the fact is before you, in all its painful reality. Mark how restlessly he has been engaged for the last ten minutes, in forming all sorts of fantastic figures with the herbs which are strewed upon the ledge before him; observe the ashy paleness of his face when a particular witness appears, and how he changes his position and wipes his clammy forehead, and feverish hands, when the case for the prosecution is closed, as if it were a relief to him to feel that the jury knew the worst. (232)

As I see it, *Sketches'*s visual methodology often expresses itself as a skepticism about the efficacy of language, an admission of the limitations of words. Thus, the sketch "Scotland-yard" ends with a frank confession of linguistic failure, of words and texts failing to represent:

> A few years hence, and the antiquary of another generation … may glance his eye over the pages we have just filled: and on all his knowledge of the history of the past, not all his black-letter lore, or his skill in book-collecting, not all the dry studies of a long life, or the dusty volumes that have cost him a fortune, may help him to the whereabout either of Scotland-yard, or of any one of the landmarks we have mentioned in describing it. (90)

"Astley's" finds the narrator openly declaring, "[W]hy should we attempt to describe that of which no description can convey an adequate idea?" (132). Describing a butler employed by the Houses of Parliament, Dickens writes,

> We needn't tell you all this, however, for if you have an atom of observation, one glance at his sleek knowing-looking head and face—his prim white neckerchief, with the wooden tie into which it has been regularly folded for twenty years past, merging by imperceptible degrees into a small-plaited shirt-frill; and his comfortable-looking form encased in a well-brushed suit of black—would give you a better idea of his real character than a column of our poor description could convey. (188-189)

The paragraph is a defense of *showing*, not *telling*, *avant la lettre*.

Dickens's choice of material throughout the sketches might fairly invite envy of the mimetic properties of Cruikshank's illustrations or what Mrs. Bedwin, as mentioned above, colorfully deems a "machine for taking likenesses." Repeatedly drawn to "all that is roving and cadger-like in nature" and regularly evincing "a feverish attachment to change and variety" (Dickens, *Sketches* 177), *Sketches* raises the problem of how to best depict that which is constantly in motion. Thus, the sketch "Omnibuses" sets out to describe the title vehicles even as "[t]he passengers change as often in the course of one journey as the figures in a kaleidoscope" (167). *Sketches'*s London is a protean one, its solidity in question, as this passage from "Gin-shops" suggests: "Quiet dusty old shops in different parts of town were pulled down; spacious premises with stuccoed fronts and gold letters, were erected instead; floors were covered with Turkey carpets; roofs supported by massive pillars; doors knocked into windows, a dozen squares of glass into one; one shopman into a dozen" (214-216). The sketch "Shops And Their Tenants" deals with "the rise or fall—of particular shops" (81), focusing on one commercial building that seems to be constantly the home of a new, short-lived business: Dickens writes that

it is "never inhabited for more than two months consecutively" (81). In the face of all this change, *texts*—in the form of signs and bills—fairly struggle to keep up, a vivid demonstration of the limitations of words:[4] "Tickets gradually appeared in the windows … then a bill was posted on the street door, intimating that the first floor was to let *un*furnished" (82). Later, we are told, "[T]here appeared a brass plate on the private door, with 'Ladies' School' legibly engraved theron; shortly afterwards we observed a second brass plate" (84). In class, we come to see—however fancifully—such passages as expressing a need for a medium—a technology—that can capture and depict motion. Fittingly, "Early Coaches" singles out for praise Ixion, the Thessalian king of Greek mythology, for having "discovered the secret of the perpetual motion" (159-161). That *motion* was a critical component of Dickens's idea of popular entertainment is the subject of an oft-quoted passage from a letter he wrote to W. C. Macready in 1857: "the common people … want more amusement, and particularly (as it strikes me) *something in* motion, though it were only a twisting fountain" (*Letters* 8: 399). Smith writes that Dickens "anticipates in images the medium that would only come into being with his death" (1). Put simply, we find it tempting to see in *Sketches by Boz* what Smith would call a "Dream of Cinema."

Fumbling Toward Narrative

As mentioned above, many of Dickens's sketches purport to be the spontaneous observations of their wandering, urban narrator. In his sketch "The Pawnbroker's Shop" he famously assigns a title to such an observer: "the speculative pedestrian" (223). The object for this figure is that promised in Dickens's 1836 preface to the First Series's first edition, "little

pieces of life and manners *as they really are*" (7, emphasis added): city life caught on the fly, a new way of seeing uniquely positioned for a particular stage of modernity. In class, we read selections from *Sketches by Boz* while watching key examples of *actualités*. Associated with Thomas Edison in the United States and brothers August and Louis Lumière in France, *actualités* were non-narrative filmed shorts that comprised the first publicly exhibited films of the 1890s. As David A. Cook explains, "The first impulse was simply to turn the camera on some interesting subject, staged or real, and let it run … [T]he earliest films are simply brief recordings of entertaining or amusing subjects" (8)—in sum, "little pictures of life and manners as they really are." In class, I use the fine anthology *Landmarks of Early Film* (1997) distributed by Image Entertainment. Among its many offerings are a number of the *actualités* produced by Edison Kinetoscope Films and the Lumière brothers. The compilation includes such early milestones as 1895's "*La Sortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumière"* ("Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory"). The list of titles alone invites comparisons to *Sketches by Boz*'s table of contents: "The Barber Shop," "Cockfight," "Poultry-Yard," "New York: Broadway at Union Square," "Lion, London Zoological Garden," and "Promenade of Ostritches, Paris Botanical Gardens." As with *Sketches*, the range of city life and its amusements is in evidence. Smith writes that "initially, film was inspired to reflect and embody the city as well as find its audience there" (3) and goes on to note, in a passage that applies equally to *Sketches by Boz*,

> Is it possible to see links between changes in urban life, consciousness and the appearance of film if, for example, we think about such phenomena as the introduction of

> street lights, plate glass windows in shops, and new intensities of movement in the urban scene related to huge increases in the number of city dwellers? (11)

Students react to these *actualités* with both curiosity and confusion: were people—indeed, paying customers—actually engaged and entertained by what looks so artless? ("Nonchalant" was how one student euphemistically described "Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory.") Reading Dickens's *Sketches* from this perspective, it is easy to see in them what amounts to a yearning to go beyond *mere reportage*, an impulse that brings into relief two overlapping developments in early film history: an increasing turn to narrative and an aspiring for a transcendent vision, one unfettered in time and space. Throughout the sketches, we see a sometimes tentative move from passive recording to active storytelling (an anticipation of Dickens's own move from *Sketches* to novels). The sketch "Hackney-Coach Stands" finds in the titular vehicles an endless source for narratives: "What an interesting book a hackney-coach might produce, if it could carry as much in its head as it does in its body! … How many stories might be related of the different people it had conveyed or matters of business or profit—pleasure or pain!" (108-109).

Here, as at many points in *Sketches*, the speaker's narrative impulses are toward tragic, often moralistic stories of falls from grace and decline into vice, crime, or poverty. "And how many melancholy tales of the same people at different periods" (109), he muses before enumerating possible stages in cautionary tales: "The country-girl—the showy, over-dressed woman—the drunken prostitute! The raw apprentice—the dissipated spendthrift—the thief!" (109). Each discrete stage is part of an overarching narrative movement—not unlike the

individual frames in a filmstrip. In "Criminal Courts," Dickens constructs a similar downward spiral out of the mere sight of an "elderly woman" and "a boy of about fourteen or fifteen":

> Their little history was obvious. The boy was her son, to whose early comfort she had perhaps sacrificed her own—for whose sake she had borne misery without reprieve, and poverty without a murmur: looking steadily forward to the time, when he who had so long witnessed her struggles for himself, might be enabled to make some exertions for their joint support. He had formed dissolute connexions; idleness had led to crime, and he had been committed to take his trail for some petty theft. (231)

In the sketch "The Pawnbroker's Shop," the narrator surveys the various, separate female patrons of the title shop, situating them within a narrative of decline: he starts with a mother and daughter portentously selling "a 'Forget me not' ring, the girl's property … given her in better times" (228) and proceeds to, first, "a young female, whose attire, miserably poor, but extremely gaudy, wretchedly cold but extravagantly fine, too plainly bespeaks her station in life" (228) and then to one deemed "the lowest of the low; dirty, unbonneted, flaunting, and slovenly" (229) before speculating, "Who shall say how soon these women may change places? The last has but two more stages—the hospital and the grave" (229).

Imagining the individual women in a grim cautionary tale where a broken engagement leads down a slippery slope to prostitution and eventual death reveals a narrator who wants to do more than simply *record*. In the justly celebrated "Meditations in Monmouth-street," the speaker is visiting the title location, "the only true and real emporium for second-hand wearing apparel" (96). From "a few suits of clothes ranged outside a shop-window," he imagines a man's

childhood, growth into the world "of the idle lounge, and the blackguard companions," and, ultimately, "a prison, and the sentence—banishment or the gallows" (98, 100-101). This history necessarily takes the narrator beyond the actual, the random articles of clothing that "had now by one of those strange conjunctions of circumstances which will occur sometimes, come to be exposed together for sale in the same shop" (98-99). He is "led away" to envisioning such details as—again—the man's long suffering, widowed mother: "Poor woman! We could imagine her assumed cheerfulness over the scanty meal, and the refusal of her own small portion, that her hungry boy might have enough" (99). Indeed, the narrator's musings transport him far beyond observation into pure flights of fancy:

> We have gone on speculating in this way, until whole rows of coats have started from their pegs, and buttoned up, of their own accord, round the waists of imaginary wearers; lines of trousers have jumped down to meet them; waistcoats have almost burst with anxiety to put themselves on; and half an acre of shoes have suddenly found feet to fit them, and gone stumping down the street with a noise which has fairly awakened us from our pleasant revery, and driven us slowly away, with a bewildered stare, an object of astonishment to the good people of Monmouth-street, and of no slight suspicion to the policemen at the opposite street corner. (98)

In its break from empirical reality, the vision anticipates a passage from *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), in which Dickens's wish for a way of seeing that is unbound in space and time is aligned with his ideas of social justice:

> Oh, for a good spirit who would take the house-tops off … and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes, to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel as he moves forth among them! For only one night's view of the pale phantoms rising from the scenes of our too long neglect; and from the thick and sullen air where Vice and Fever propagate together, raining the tremendous social retributions which are ever pouring down, and ever coming thicker! Bright and blest the morning that should rise on such a night: for men, delayed to no more by stumbling-blocks of their own making, which are but specks of dust upon the path between them and eternity, would then apply themselves, like creatures of one common origin, owing one duty to the Father of one family, and tending to one common end, to make the world a better place! (738)

In class, I like to suggest that here Dickens might be yearning prophetically for the omnipotence of the filmmaker's camera, recalling an interesting suggestion of Leon Edel's: "Novelists have sought almost from the first to become a camera. And not a static instrument but one possessing the movement through space and time which the motion-picture camera has achieved in our century" (qtd. in Smith 46).

Just as Dickens's "speculative pedestrian" began recycling, say, second-hand clothing into embryonic narratives, we see the early film world of *actualités* exploring the possibilities of narrative as early as the 1890s. I make a point of showing the Lumierès' 1895 short "*L'Arroseur arrosé*" ("The Sprinkler Sprinkled") (available on the *Landmarks of Early Film* collection). In the short, a man is watering a garden with a lawn hose, as an adolescent boy sneaks up behind him, steps on a section of the hose, and cuts off the flow of water. Confused, the man peers into

the nozzle of the hose; from behind, the boy steps off the hose, and the man is blasted in the face with water. The film ends with the man chasing down the boy to, in turn, soak him with water from the hose. Highbrow it is not, yet in class we come to see it as conforming to the basic Aristotelian requirements of plot in its purest form—i.e., a protagonist and an antagonist, rising action, a climax, and (speedy) resolution. In the short's clutzy slapstick, from an era before "the notion that the camera might be used to tell a story—i.e., to create a narrative reality" (Cook 13), *L'Arroseur arrosé* reveals a tentative fumbling toward narrative.

Indeed, I discuss in class how by one famous account, the full possibilities of the filmic camera were made manifest through a moment of *fumbling*. According to the memoirs of illustrator, professional magician, and early filmmaker Georges Méliès, "[O]ne afternoon in the fall of 1896 while he was filming a Parisian street scene, his camera jammed in the process of recording an omnibus as it emerged from a tunnel. When he got the machine working again, a funeral hearse had replaced the omnibus, so that in projection the omnibus seemed to change into the hearse" (Cook 14). Here, through pure serendipity, Méliès, while in the very *Sketches by Boz*-like act of recording "little pictures of life," for one, arguably created a (highly symbolic) narrative (from omnibus to hearse, from life to death: *fin*); more importantly, as with the "Boz" of "Meditations in Monmouth-street," Méliès's vision is "led away" (Dickens, *Sketches* 99) from the dictates of time and space. As Cook elaborates, "By this accident, Méliès came to recognize the possibilities for the manipulation of real time and real space inherent in the editing of exposed film. He had discovered that film need not obey the laws of empirical reality" (14).

At this point as a class we view both Méliès's *Le voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*) and Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, two seminal, short *narrative* films. Taken together, the two works illustrate the process by which the filmic camera stopped being merely a passive recorder. A loose, one-reel adaptation of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and H. G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* (1900-01), Méliès's charming short proceeds through roughly sixteen tableaux-like scenes (chiefly featuring actors posed in front of stylized, painted backgrounds). Indeed, each scene feels rather like an accompanying illustration to the narrator's voice-over description of the onscreen action, and each individual scene has a beginning, middle, and end: this curiously undermines the overall film's narrative continuity when it famously shows the French rocket's initial landing *twice* (i.e., in two separate scenes). Each scene ends with a dissolve—reinforcing the sensation of watching a procession of *tableaux vivants*—and appears to be filmed in one take. (Edits within a scene are reserved solely for optical effects.) The individual scenes, meanwhile, are shot from the same angle. As Cook observes, Méliès's "camera functioned as the inert eye of a theater spectator" (16)—so much so that in the film's most iconic image (the rocket's landing on the literal face of the moon), Méliès moved the unwieldy prop moon closer to the camera, rather than the other way around.

Just one year later, *The Great Train Robbery* offers a dramatic development in narrative filmmaking. Gone is the sense of a stately procession of *tableaux vivants*, as Porter cuts seamlessly between scenes and locations without dissolves or fade-outs. Moreover, as Cook notes, Porter cuts "without playing [scenes] out to the end" (22). (Tellingly, Porter's film eschews the sort of voice-over narration to which Méliès's static scenes often acted like

accompanying illustrations, suggesting a further evolution toward a purely cinematic language.) Cook writes that in *The Great Train Robbery*, "the basic signifying unit of film … is not the *scene* … but rather the *shot*" (22). Just as Porter frees his film from an idea of *theatrical time* focused on the individual scene, his camera is freed from the spatial confines of the proscenium arch. Porter's camera is a dynamic one, at one point positioned atop the locomotive engine as though peering over a robber's shoulder.

From here, we typically spend time discussing D. W. Griffith's legacy for early film history, for the full *narrative turn* of film as an art form. Fittingly, I stress how Griffith (born 1875) was a lifelong devotee of Victorian literature (his filmography includes an adaptation of Dickens's *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845) and multiple adaptations of Alfred Tennyson's *Enoch Arden* (1864) to emphasize how "Griffith effected a nearly complete transformation of nineteenth-century narrative modes into cinematic terms" (Cook 54). Griffith's most significant influence was his purposeful use of such camera and editing effects as close-ups, iris shots, and parallel editing, innovations that would mark the full autonomy of the filmic camera. As Cook notes, "With these additions to film language, the whole notion of the frame as a proscenium arch, pervasive since Méliès, began to break down, and by the time Griffith finished *The Birth of a Nation* in early 1915, it had nearly disappeared" (59). That Griffith, curiously, would see his techniques as a logical extension of his Victorian reading habits emerges from a famous anecdote. Asked to justify the copious parallel editing in his 1908 *After Many Years* to a skeptical producer who asked, "How can you tell a story jumping about like that? The people

won't know what it's about?" Griffiths allegedly replied, "Well … doesn't Dickens write that way?" (qtd in Cook 56).

Oliver Twist as Narrative

Typically, the first full-length novel after our unit on *Sketches* and *actualités* is one more by Dickens, *Oliver Twist*. First appearing in the same year as the Second Series of *Sketches by Boz*, it provides us a natural successor to *Sketches* in part since some of the journalistic material from Dickens's first book anticipates *Oliver Twist*. Thus, J. Hillis Miller notes that the sketches "inevitably derive some of their meaning for a twentieth-century reader from the fact that … he may encounter in 'The Hospital Patient' a preliminary sketch for the murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*" (9). Moreover, *Oliver Twist* was Dickens's second and final major collaboration with Cruikshank, who illustrated the first edition and whose significance here, too, raises important questions in an adaptation class, questions pertaining to the primacy of words versus images. Henry James famously called *Oliver Twist* "more Cruikshank's than Dickens's; it was a thing of such terribly vivid images" (qtd. in Horne xxvi).[5] Moreover, Cruikshank, as Horne recounts, "after Dickens's death … would indeed claim … that the idea for *Oliver Twist* was his" (xxvi): suggesting, again, that "In the beginning was the Image."

The opening pages of *Oliver Twist* find Agnes, Oliver's mother, dying in a parish workhouse under the care of the parish surgeon: "The surgeon leant over the body, and raised the left hand. 'The old story,' he said, shaking his head: 'no wedding ring, I see.'" (5). The scene intriguingly complements such *Sketches* as "Meditations in Monmouth-street" or "The

Pawnbroker's Shop" as a reflection on telling and, indeed, retelling stories: in the latter sketch, Dickens's speculative pedestrian constructs a narrative that begins with the pawning of a "'Forget me not' ring", just as the surgeon here constructs a typical fallen woman narrative out of the lack of a wedding ring (228). The scene takes on added resonance in my idea of a literature-film adaptation course, given its bold suggestion that, perhaps, there are no new, original stories: just the *old* one, endlessly recycled, endlessly adapted. Indeed, as a serialized novel that originally appeared in the magazine *Bentley's Miscellany*, *Oliver Twist*, in its textual history, makes manifest the role of recycling in storytelling. As Burton M. Wheeler recounts at length, *Oliver Twist* was not originally conceived as a novel but, rather, emerged gradually out of a series of loosely connected, sketch-like pieces focusing on the fictional town of Mudfog, which Dickens contributed to *Bentley's*. For this reason, I assign the Penguin Edition edited by Philip Horne. Not only does it reproduce all of Cruikshank's illustrations, but it also takes as its copy-text the serialized first edition of *Oliver Twist*. The edition captures how the novel emerged from the short, fragmented matter of Mudfog; it reveals Dickens's second novel as, itself, an extended case of fumbling toward narrative.

Conclusion: Narrative *As* Fumbling?

Oliver Twist, of course, gives the lie to "the old story": it redeems Oliver's mother, the projected "fallen woman" of the surgeon's narrative, who, it turns out, once had a wedding ring. More importantly, it repeatedly and ultimately rescues Oliver from the confining cultural narratives typically supplied for presumably illegitimate workhouse orphans declared born to be

hanged.[6] I want to stress this notion of narratives as confinement. Part of my motivation in beginning this course with *Sketches* and *actualités*—in going back to the halting, fragmentary texts that, like the stuttering, flickering frames of early film itself, predate sustained, full-length narratives—is so as to return to an excitingly primordial moment when narrative was but one possibility. Starting with *Sketches* and *actualités* allows me then to end the class by suggesting how a *narrative turn* could mean a case of forsaking more interesting roads-not-taken: a case of fumbling in the wrong direction?

To be sure, where both Dickens and film are concerned, historical narratives of progress should be met with skepticism. Dickens himself would contribute to the sense that *Sketches by Boz* represented an embryonic stage in his artistic development when he airily declared, "The whole of these sketches were written and published … when I was a very young man. They were collected and republished while I was still a very young man; and sent into the world with all their imperfections (a good many) on their heads" ("Preface to the First Cheap Edition" [11]). This declaration, however, was in 1850, from the height of his fame. The 1839 edition of *Sketches*, which most studies of Dickens and *Sketches by Boz* take as their copy text, explicitly divided all of Dickens's sketches into the following sequential categories: Seven Sketches from Our Parish, Scenes, Characters, and Tales. As Miller famously noted, the internal organization was constructed to suggest Dickens's supposed evolutionary development from a writer of sketches to a writer of fiction: deliberately placing "Tales" at the end suggests that they were written last and "emerge[d] as linear narrative out of the static poses of the earlier 'Scenes' and 'Characters'" (19). We now know, however, that, for example, Dickens's *earliest* published

writing was a "Tale," the short story then titled "A Dinner at Poplar Walk," which appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* of December 1833. Moreover, Dennis Walder raises an interesting paradox where the 1839 *Sketches* as a whole is concerned: "the writer's imaginative fancy is often most persuasive when it is not attempting a consciously fictional tale" (xxiv)—put simply, Dickens's powers are more abundant in the "intermediate" sketches of Scenes and Characters.

Similarly, in film history many have questioned the idea that *actualités* and *A Trip to the Moon* constitute a "primitive cinema." Thus, Tom Gunning substitutes the term "cinema of attractions," denoting a cinema "more interested in the display of curiosities" as opposed to "a cinema of narrative integration which subordinates film form to the development of stories and characters" (6). As Cook notes of such films, "There is an increasing body of opinion … that their original audiences experienced these films very differently than we do—as a kind of performance spectacle or 'attraction, whose function was to *present* rather than to represent, to *show* rather than to narrate" (16). He notes that this mode of attraction "went underground to become an important element of avant garde cinema and certain narrative genres" (16). Every time I teach this particular class, I have a vocal quorum of students that prefers the fanciful, rococo fabulism of *A Trip to the Moon* to the more conventional, action-packed verisimilitude of *The Great Train Robbery*. Méliès's episodic, storybook artifice is a crucial one to a counterhistory of film—not unlike how the romance, the Gothic, and magical realism challenge triumphalist histories of the realist novel.

James Naremore notes, in what he calls a "significant historical irony," that film's growing technological sophistication near the start of the twentieth century meant that "film was

long regarded in some quarters as the quintessentially modernist medium": its possibilities were seen in terms of the experimental and *avant-garde*, rather than with the more "middlebrow" aims of storytelling (5). It is in this context that we as a class discuss D. W. Griffith's legacy. Most of my students will have had some passing familiarity with the controversies attending Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), and my suggestion is that *The Birth of a Nation*'s racism, its unabashed glorification of the Ku Klux Klan, is the most conspicuous, unpalatable manifestation of a reactionary, backward-looking impulse. As Cook puts it at length,

> [Griffith] was unquestionably the seminal genius of the narrative cinema and its first great visionary artist, but he was also a provincial southern romantic with pretensions to high literary culture and a penchant for sentimentality and melodrama … Griffith was the film's first great technical master and its first legitimate poet, but he was also a muddleheaded racial bigot who quite literally saw all of human history in the black-and-white terms of nineteenth-century melodrama. (51)

Later, Cook notes, "Griffith's penchant for the more popular Victorian poets and novelists … produce[d] a set of naively romantic values" (60). As such, Griffith's influence on film may have been to put it on a retrograde course from which it never fully recovered. As Robert Stam writes, "Despite its surface modernity and technological razzle-dazzle, dominant cinema has maintained, on the whole, a premodernist aesthetic corresponding to that of the nineteenth century mimetic novel" (75). Thus, the case of Griffith allows us to at least consider the possibility, by the end of the semester, that reinforcing cinema's roots in a chiefly Victorian literary, mimetic, and

narrative culture—ostensible origins frequently honored through adaptation—may risk foreclosing equally interesting possibilities.

I like to end the semester by exposing students to experimental, non-narrative film chiefly from the early twentieth century, a cinema that represents a promising road, for the most part, not taken. Kino has made a number of such works available through such excellent compilations as *Avant-Garde: Experimental Cinema of the 1920s and '30s*, a collection that includes short works by such figures as Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp as well as 1933's *Lot in Sodom*, directed by James Sibley Watson, who was associated with the modernist magazine *The Dial* (where the first American edition of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) would appear). Moreover, we pay particular attention to Dziga Vertov's masterful *Man with The Movie Camera* (1929). A triumph of Soviet montage editing, Vertov's wordless "city symphony" depicts a day in the life of a mechanized, contemporary city (a composite of Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, and such locales) as its shops, mines, factories, railways, trolley lines, buses, public fountains (like Dickens's "twisting fountain"?), assembly lines, etc., awaken to positively hum with life. Subtitled "An Excerpt from the Diary of a Cameraman," the film opens with its sole intertitle declaring,

> This film presents an experiment in the cinematic communication of visible events without the aid of intertitles (A Film without Intertitles), without the aid of a scenario (A Film without a Scenario), without the aid of theater (A Film without Sets, Actors, Etc.,). This experimental work aims at creating a truly international, absolute language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theater and literature.

It is a dazzling, dizzying celebration of urban life. The title alone suggests what the Dickens of *Sketches* might have achieved in another time and context.

Notes

[1] Thus, Michael Chanan writes, "The final birth pangs of cinema in Britain began on 17 October 1894 with the English debut of Edison's kinetoscope" (173). He goes on to note that the first two public film exhibitions in London occurred in 1896. Similarly, Joss Marsh and Kamilla Elliott write that cinema "was born in 1895" (458). As many have noted, the Victorian origins of film greatly determined the nature and preferred material of early film as it became a narrative medium. Marsh and Elliott assert that adaptations of Victorian literature accounted for 1500 films from the 1890s through 1930 a preponderance that persists: "the Victorian novel … remains an important origin for film, and there are four main strands to consider in its persisting influences: its value as a quarry for plots and characters; the social function it transmitted to cinema; its role as narrative model; and the cultural prestige it lent the new medium" (458-459). Indeed, in some cases, adapting Victorian literature may come as homage to film's Victorian origins. Sometimes I stress this point in class by assigning the novel *Dracula* (1896) and showing a clever scene from Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) that finds Gary Oldman's Dracula and Winona Ryder's Mina attending a screening at one of London's "cinematographs": the moment deftly returns Stoker's endlessly adapted 1897 novel—which Stoker originally conceived as a play for the spectacle-heavy Victorian stage—to the late-Victorian cultural moment it shares with the birth of cinema.

[2] Thus, at Burford's Panorama in London, the illusion was fostered through the "specifications" Richard D. Altick enumerates:

> a circular building; lighting admitted exclusively from the top; an enclosure to prevent the observer from going too near the painting; over the enclosure, a shade or roof "to prevent an observer seeing above the drawing or painting when looking up"—so as to conceal the direct-light source—and a similar obstruction, such as a wall or paling, at the bottom; an entrance to the enclosure from below, so that no door would interrupt the continuity of the scene; and adequate ventilation without the use of windows. (129)

Altick's book helpfully reproduces original plans and diagrams for clarification, and many of these are readily available online.

[3] Robert Stam discusses the assumed superiority of literature to film in the context of a much larger "iconophobia" "traceable to the Judaic-Muslim-Protestant prohibitions on 'graven images' and to the Platonic and Neoplatonic depreciation of the world of phenomenal appearance" (58). To be sure, however, such attitudes may be less applicable to students from what Peter Clandfield has called a "culture of ever-proliferating media," one where "moving-image media have supplanted literature in terms of their significance to students" (140-141). At my institution, where the course I described is offered to English majors, our students reflect a wide range in terms of media literacy and appreciation for and knowledge of the film medium, including, of course, many students who, like Clandfield's, "are smarter with movies and other visual materials than with books" (141). Nevertheless, I have found that students understand "The book is always better" as a cultural commonplace, and on the first day of class, I appeal to their widespread skepticism toward this "axiomatic superiority of literature to film" to come as a class to some tentative hypotheses about where this assumption comes from (58). Typically, some

sense of "iconophobia" as a venerable cultural inheritance is mentioned. (I like to add, "John 1:1 says, 'In the beginning was the Word,' not 'In the beginning was the Image.'") From there, we easily problematize such tenets as I prompt students to recall an equally axiomatic pronouncement among creative writers: Show, Don't Tell. The maxim suggests that a visual aesthetic is, indeed, an aspirational one for the written word, a notion I explore within *Sketches by Boz* in the next section.

[4] See my "Steel Bubbles: Death, Inexhaustibility, and Dickens's Idea of the Book in *Sketches by Boz*, First Series (1836)," in which I see in the 1836 First Series of *Sketches* a suggestion of the limitations of *books*. I examine how "the First Series is arranged to produce a celebration of *inexhaustibility*." (As Dickens declares in the sketch "Shops and Their Tenants," "What *inexhaustible* food for speculation do the streets of London afford!") (80). Accordingly, I note, "The tomb-like solidity of the book can never keep up with the city's undying inexhaustibility."

[5] Accordingly, as a class we view David Lean's highly controversial 1948 adaptation of *Oliver Twist*, the visual aesthetics of which are thoroughly indebted to George Cruikshank's illustrations. For a further sense of my use of Lean in this sort of course, see my "Apples to Apples: A Book-History Approach to Film Adaptations in the Classroom" in addition to my essay "Oliver's *Auteurs*: The Case of Lean and Polanski," in *Adaptation, Awards Culture, and the Value of Prestige* (Edited by Colleen Kennedy-Karpat and Eric Sandberg, Palgrave Studies in Adaptation and Visual Culture, Switzerland, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017, pp. 97-113.), which discusses Roman Polanski's 2005 adaptation as well.

[6] See, again, my "Steel Bubbles: Death, Inexhaustibility, and Dickens's Idea of the Book in *Sketches by Boz* (1836)," in which I discuss how the monthly serial structure of *Oliver Twist* sees Oliver regularly resurrected from a death-like state, a material corollary to both Dickens's rescuing Oliver from the fatalistic, death-driven cultural narratives assigned to illegitimate children and his conviction that, as I put it, "Books are coffins."

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