From Book to Film: The Semiotics of Jewishness in *Oliver Twist*

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Of Dickens’s works, *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) is the most frequently adapted, numbering as many as nineteen silent film versions, four sound movies¹ and a continuing output of television and video productions (Boulton; Pointer). Despite their success, however, adaptations of the memorable story of Oliver’s journey from the workhouse via the slums of London to eventual safety had to come to terms with reactions to the notorious character of Fagin, a Jewish receiver of stolen goods and leader of a gang of juvenile delinquents. Associated as it was with the history of the marginalization of the Jews, Fagin’s ethnicity was the more problematic as the novel related it to crime and child abuse, a disturbing connection that has stirred sensitivities to this day.²

Among objections raised by Victorians, those by Eliza Davis, wife of J. P. Davis, solicitor, who had purchased Tavistock House in August 1860, stand out. Writing to Dickens on 22 June 1863, asking for a donation to a Jewish memorial, she complained about the unflattering characterization of Fagin and accused him through his creation of encouraging “a vile prejudice against the despised Hebrew” (*Letters* 10: 269 n.). In partial amendment Dickens created Riah, the kindly Jew in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), though his attempt, weakened by characteristically Victorian contradictions regarding the cultural Other, substantially fails to frame Riah within a credible narrative and does not succeed in making him less of an outcast (Baumgarten). To further disprove anti-Semitic prejudices, Dickens also excised references to Fagin’s Jewishness in the 1867 edition of *Oliver Twist*, beginning with chapter 32 and continuing throughout the text, except for

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¹ They include David Lean’s *Oliver Twist* (1948), Carol Reed’s musical *Oliver!* (1968), the Disney cartoon *Oliver & Company* (1988) and Roman Polanski’s *Oliver Twist* (2005).

² See *Fagin the Jew* (2003), a graphic novel by the famous Jewish-American cartoonist Will Eisner that purports to deconstruct anti-Semitic stereotypes.
The novel was illustrated by George Cruikshank, who claimed to have significantly influenced Dickens. Whatever the truth of these allegations, they do reveal the illustrator’s imaginative involvement in the story, which is evident in the powerful twenty-four plates he provided for *Twist*. When dealing with Fagin, Cruikshank fully accepted Dickens’s representation of the old crook as evil, inscribing his body with the combination of stock “Jewish” traits enumerated in the text – the large hooked nose, the long matted red hair, a “revealing” expression of cowardice and cunning and the feminized garb of the flannel gown, a sort of debased caftan and an ambiguous signifier that hinted at sexual depravity. “Violating valued Victorian gender boundaries, Fagin is both paternal and maternal, … both masculine and feminine at once” (Brosh 90). As a surrogate father he provides a home for the orphaned boys, as a surrogate mother he cooks for and plays with them.

In film adaptations the rendering of Fagin’s otherness is further complicated by the act of repositioning Jewishness within cultural and political contexts subsequent to World War II and the genocide of the Jews. Separated as they are by almost sixty years, David Lean’s and Roman Polanski’s films could be ideally envisaged as embracing the two extremes of a historical trajectory that, spanning the entire second half of the twentieth century, reaches the current century carrying *Oliver Twist* into full neo-Victorian mood, whereby the past is rewritten to question the present and illustrate major cultural shifts. Both films dwell on explicit as well as hidden cultural and political agendas of their society (Stern), resorting in their distinctive ways to the memory of the war and the Holocaust, a major historical trauma which influences the deep imaginative texture of the film narrative.

In David Lean’s *Oliver Twist* (1948) Fagin, played by Alec Guinness, resembles Cruikshank’s illustrations but also the anti-Semitic caricatures in *Der Stürmer*, the weekly newspaper published by Julius Streicher in Nazi Germany (Gross). No wonder, then, that the film ignited bitter reactions in the audience when it was first shown in post-war Berlin in early 1949 (John), the city still recoiling from the trauma of the Shoah. In the United

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3 Subsequent references to the novel are to the OUP World Classics edition, which does not include his alteration of “the Jew” to either “Fagin” or “he.”

4 On Dickens and Cruikshank see Appendix I to the OUP edition, pp. 443–45. Prior to *Oliver Twist*, George Cruikshank had illustrated *Sketches by Boz* (1836). He also illustrated the folk tale “The Jew in the Brambles” (1857) by the Brothers Grimm, another text remarkable for its debatable handling of Jewishness.

5 “Fagin’s gender ambiguities and the allusion to his sexual perversity draw on classic anti-Semitic tropes. Jewish men in the nineteenth century were typically constructed as sexually diseased, perverse, and, most often, effeminate” (Brosh 90).
States the film “was withheld until 1951 and then only released with heavy cuts” (Shail 130) due to pressures from the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith and the New York Board of Rabbis (Gross). When finally screened three years after the London Premiere, twelve minutes of it were deleted.

Roman Polanski’s *Oliver Twist* (2005) not only “is the first large-scale dramatic adaptation of the novel for the cinema for almost sixty years” (Litvack 261), but it also purports to subvert ethnic stereotypes. Painful personal memories partly motivate this act of rewriting: now in his mid-seventies, Roman Polanski is a Polish Jew from Krakow who was made an orphan in the ghetto when his family was deported to concentration camps (his father returned from Mauthausen, his mother perished at Auschwitz). Screenwriter Ronald Harwood, who had already collaborated with Polanski on *The Pianist* (2002), is a South-African Jew who grew up under apartheid, while actor Ben Kingsley, as Fagin, is partly Indian of Kenyan roots and partly Russian-Jewish on his mother’s side.

This article aims to compare Dickens’s textual representation of Fagin with Lean’s and Polanski’s “range of representational modes (including image, movement, gesture and voice)” (Jewitt 171) in the construction of this character. The expected discrepancies between the three texts will provide a departure point for an understanding of how representational practices can circulate, respond to and contest discriminatory ideologies. In turn, this will open up to a reflection on how the translation of semiotic artefacts across different media and over history is a critical activity that creatively reinvents the past for the modern age.

**Adapting a literary classic**

By repositioning a text in another medium and historical context, the act of adaptation destabilizes its meaning and exposes it to the potential inflections arising from the multidimensional confrontation with the source text, its tradition in the collective imagination as well as the issues and provocations the text manages to evoke and generate in the new context. As hermeneutic relations between second-order creations and their source materials are always “interrogative, exposing the cultural and social conditions of those materials and of the translation or adaptation that has processed them” (Venuti 25), adaptations can be envisaged as Janus-faced artefacts that, by revisiting the past, are in fact questioning the present through a sort of defamiliarizing lens.
Dickens’s Fagin

*Oliver Twist* has been defined as a “culture-text” (John, 207), one that resonates with a circulated cultural memory (Litvack), generated by both the popularity of the story and its themes, as they were perceived in Victorian times and have been revisited over history in altered social contexts. In a sense, and understandably so after the Shoah, contemporary culture has grown more aware of the issues of Jewishness and anti-Semitism and is ready to react to prejudiced meanings concerning the ethnic/racial/religious Other than the traditional Victorian mindset that Dickens voiced, sometimes unreflexively.

As Susan Meyer convincingly argues, the novel remains within the ideological strictures of the conventional anti-Semitism of Dickens’s time, place and class, an anti-Semitism made the more infamous by the religious righteousness that provided a justification for it. The narrative unhesitatingly upholds what has been defined the “sinister Jew paradigm” (Pastner 4), according to which the Jew is a deicide, often endowed with superior intellectual powers, perversely put to use for wicked purposes. It comes as no surprise, then, that Fagin’s role in corrupting people and masterminding the destinies of the other characters should be emphasized in a number of ways that do not eschew stigmatizing him as quintessentially evil.

Fagin is memorably introduced as “a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair” (63; ch. 8). He appears to combine and condense in his person the features of the utmost villainy and Jewishness, as if they were somehow inextricable. A thief, a miser, a pimp, possibly a pederast and paedophiliac, he is part of a Jewish peddling network that inhabits the London underworld. Apparently safe in Pentonville, Oliver is found again by Fagin through his mysterious interconnectedness with the Jew he sells Oliver’s old clothes to. And in the Three Cripples public house, we meet Barney, “another Jew: younger than Fagin, but nearly as vile and repulsive in appearance” (113; ch. 15).

Several textual occurrences refer to Fagin as the “merry old gentleman” – a traditional name for Satan – and he is also compared to a snake, a well-known symbol of the devil: “the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he

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6 The big Semitic nose is one of them: “Fagin followed up this remark by striking the side of his nose with his right forefinger, – a gesture which Noah attempted to imitate, though not with complete success, in consequence of his own nose not being large enough for the purpose” (382; ch. 42).

7 “The medieval stereotype of the Jew as usurer finds obvious traces in Fagin’s miserly hoarding of money and valuable objects” (Brosh 90).
moved: crawling forth, by night in search of some rich offal for a meal” (147; ch. 19). He is slyly obsequious and manipulative in his use of language, turning terms of endearment into threatening forms of power control. When Oliver first meets him, Fagin is standing at a fireplace, holding a pitchfork. “Don’t you know the devil when he’s got a great-coat on?” (148; ch. 19), Sikes exclaims to his dog; later, Nancy comments, “Devil that he is, and worse than devil as he has been to me” (373; ch. 46). “Fire this infernal den” (206; ch. 26), curses Monks; “Hell’s fire” (381; ch. 47), exclaims Sikes, when Fagin reveals that Nancy has betrayed them. At executions Fagin mocks those people that die “with prayers on their lips” (429; ch. 52) and, once in the condemned cell, drives away with curses “people of his own persuasion [that] had come to pray beside him” (430; ch. 52), remaining an unbeliever to the very end.

“You must deliver up the Jew” (373; ch. 46) is Brownlow’s appeal to Nancy, who pays for her refusal to betray Fagin with a violent death. The symbolic structure of the plot, which ends with a scene of restored Christianity in an old village church and on a note of compassion for Agnes, Oliver’s “weak and erring” mother (440; ch. 53), is so ideologically compelling that it cannot but trigger the scapegoat mechanism and expel the unchristian and unassimilated Other in the effort to restore a viable identity for the community. However, while in court “Fagin has almost no voice. The Jew is the silent object of scrutiny, gazed at, interpreted, judged, condemned, unable to voice his own perspective in reply” (Meyer 247), in prison he reacts “with the power of desperation”: “Strike them all dead. What right have they to butcher me?” sending up “cry upon cry that penetrated even those massive walls, and rang in their ears until they reached the open yard” (435–36; ch. 52).

**Lean’s Fagin**

Lean’s adaptation (with screenwriter Stanley Hayes) represents Fagin with an enormous hooked nose – as in the Cruikshank illustrations – and makes him speak with a lisp, another stereotypical Jewish trait, though the term “Jew” never recurs in the script. Close-ups of Fagin’s chipped teeth, shaggy eyebrows and matted hair, profile shots emphasizing his “Semitic” nose, as well as the effect of his droning voice, are all cinematic techniques that visually and verbally translate what the lexical choices of the novel construct as a monstrous otherness.

“Although silent film representations are far more anti-Semitic than Lean’s” (John 211), Alec Guinness’s portrayal was perceived as offensive by part of the audience in the immediate aftermath of the atrocities of the
Holocaust. Quite understandably, despite the consensus of a large number of viewers and critics that consider it to be a screen classic (Sasaki; Shail; Connor),\(^8\) Lean’s adaptation continues to arouse contradictory reactions to this day,\(^9\) as “viewers bring different ways of seeing to an image, and their meanings are the result of their negotiation, or even rejection, in the process of interpreting/engaging with an image at different historical-social moments” (Jewitt 177, citing Gillian Rose).

Rather than discuss Lean’s complicity with Victorian anti-Semitic prejudices, more relevant to my analysis is the treatment of Fagin in the film. Lean’s Twist espouses the stark moral vision of the source text, which depicts a world of hardened hypocrites, thieves and murderers at all levels of society and adds some original visual touches to it: the melodramatic effects of black and white, an increased sense of displacement in the labyrinthine city, and expressionist camera techniques (Pulver). As for the casting, the haggard starved faces of the workhouse women and orphans (some of them with shaven heads, evocative of inmates in war and concentration camps), Fagin’s boys and the common people in the London crowd are unforgettable.

Undeniably, the film imagery conveys an unsettling feeling of historical trauma and despair. Implicated in this ruthless, structurally unjust world (the sequence that moves from Brownlow’s wealthy mansion to Fagin’s bare dirty rooms is self-explanatory) in which the so-called good people are always ambiguous or inadequate, Fagin is as much a vicious perpetrator of evil deeds as a stubbornly resilient outcast. Whereas the rich and literate Brownlow is often dumbfounded, Lean captures Fagin’s superior vitality, assertiveness and power over words, all abilities, one might infer, he has been forced to develop in order to survive. Through body posture, movement, gesture and gaze, Fagin tends to dominate the frame, projecting a defiant identity in spite of representational stereotypes.

Relating Lean’s visual discourse to the period culture, Liora Brosh provides an accurate contextualization of Fagin’s Jewishness:

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8 “Lean made two extraordinary versions of Charles Dickens’ novels, Great Expectations (1946) and Oliver Twist (1948). The two films set a benchmark for adaptations of nineteenth-century literature which has rarely been matched. Lean’s particular skill lies in the tight control he maintains over the sprawling narratives and in the visual panache with which he pictures the famous characters and episodes from the two novels. The casting is nearly always perfect, the set designs by John Bryan and the cinematography of Guy Green capture the dark claustrophobia of Dickens’ London and Lean shapes the storytelling with an absolute fluency” (Shail 129–30).

9 For example, Ben Kingsley, who plays Fagin in Polanski’s adaptation and whose mother is of Jewish-Russian descent, found Lean’s film deeply disturbing (Movieweb, 20 September 2005).

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In a departure from the novel, Lean’s ideal is less about the private domestic sphere and more about Britain’s collective identity. … Lean’s *Oliver Twist* is obsessed with those characters who subvert national boundaries. Both Fagin and the prostitute Nancy are represented as untrustworthy and not reliably British. … Even though Lean is said to have relied on Cruikshank for his film, unlike in the illustrations, Fagin is not small and lanky. … In the illustrations Cruikshank drew for the novel, Fagin is thinner, smaller, and shorter than any other adult character, especially Sikes. In the film, in contrast, his costumes make Fagin appear larger even than Sikes. … This film was made when the Second World War was a recent and vivid memory, the British Empire was disintegrating, and Jews were fighting the British to establish an independent Jewish state. … These new historical contexts changed the conventional trope of the cowardly feminized Jew represented in Dickens (Brosh 94–95).

In addition, Lean’s Fagin has a strong East-European accent which categorizes him as an alien with an unstable national identity. He is represented as a black-market racketeer, possibly a spy (who is also spied upon by Nancy in the tavern), and a pimp profiting from prostitution, all common suspicions surrounding Jews during the war (Brosh 96–97).

As Lean drops the sequence of Fagin awaiting death in the condemned cell, the film does not finish with paradigmatic punishment. At the same time, by eliminating the Rose Maylie subplot, it disregards the providential ending of the novel, which seems to find provisional respite from the nightmare of history in the final icon of the reconstituted family living in the countryside. When the bloodthirsty mob pulls down the door of his final refuge in Jacob’s Island, Fagin stands alone for a moment, facing them, and cries out in a tone of challenge: “Strike them all dead. What right have you to butcher me?”, where the Dickens novel reads: “What right have they to butcher me?” (435; ch. 52, *my italics*). The shift from the pronoun “they” to the pronoun “you” establishes a new interpersonal relation between the Jew and the crowd, while the brutal confrontation represented in the scene appears more like a release of aggressiveness than a conclusive act of justice.

Despite its ambiguity and violence, by rescuing Oliver and expunging the villainous Jew the final scene would seem to perform the symbolic task of restoring a provisional sense of community not just in the film plot but, more significantly, for the British people recovering from the war, who can legitimately be identified as the collective actor of the entire adaptation. The pressing need for the imaginative reconstruction of a compromised national identity is thus consigned to the myth-making potential of a burgeoning film industry.
Polanski’s Fagin

Polanski’s adaptation is characterized by several thematic variations and representational choices that give Fagin greater emphasis than in the book and in Lean’s film. Stripped of the entire Rose Maylie and Monks subplots, its script includes new episodes and expands some of those already present in the novel, leading to a much closer focus on Fagin the Jew.

Polanski’s Fagin lives in the attic of a dilapidated mansion that still retains memories of its past grandeur and elegant furnishings. Old, hunchbacked and with a big nose, he is not grotesque in the way of Cruikshank’s illustrations, nor virile and assertive as in Lean’s adaptation. Like the place he lives in, Fagin keeps some faint traces of his past gentility. He speaks in a soft nasal voice and, unlike Dickens’s Fagin with his “hideous grin” or “ghastly grin,” he often smiles in what looks like a vulnerable, almost endearing manner. Drawing upon personal recollections, actor Ben Kingsley humanizes Fagin, making him more captivating than intimidating, but still capturing his hypocrisy, ambiguity and cynical exploitation of his “pupils,” as the manipulative surrogate father who tries to provide street children with a home. Kingsley’s characterization of Fagin “is much less melodramatic than Alec Guinness’s coiled, satanic Fagin and much less twinkly and avuncular than Ron Moody’s. He seems wearier, more bewildered, more decayed than either of them, yet also more dangerous” (Connor). Besides, with a strategy possibly remindful of Moody’s downplaying of Fagin’s ethnicity, no mention is made in the adaptation to his being a Jew (John).

No longer the quintessentially evil Jew of medieval stereotypes, Polanski’s Fagin is a damaged complicated human being who invites a more complex emotional reaction than just contempt and sheer hate, a reaction that is frequently conveyed by Oliver’s childish gaze. Several frames of Fagin and Oliver at a horizontal angle, i.e. at the same level visually and looking into each other’s eyes, suggest empathy and seduction, while close-up shots on

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10 In Kingsley’s own words, his interpretation of Fagin carries autobiographical traces that mix both his previous acting in Poland and childhood memories: “It evolved from me, very much from me. When I was filming Schindler’s List, I found some sepia photographs in a store in the Jewish quarter of late 19th century Jews in Krakow. Wonderful faces, really bizarre clothes, I was very fond of them. They were part of my performance in Schindler’s List and I loved them. They were part of my Fagin too. I also had engravings and pictures of Shylock, by Edmund Keane, and how they interpreted that great icon as well. The costume came from an antique junk dealer that I had met as a child. He sold junk, foreign coins, old musical instruments, clothing. He was my Fagin as a child. I used to go and buy things from him. I was fascinated by him and he wore three overcoats tied together by a piece, like I do as Fagin. He was bent over and he had a voice like I do” (Movieweb, 20 September 2005).
Fagin’s mobile tormented features emphasize his ambiguity, an ambiguity, however, which is not inevitably ascribed to his being Jewish and sees him simultaneously as victim and villain.

Emblematic of his moral bankruptcy is the sequence in which he inspects his treasure box. The camera insistently lingers on Fagin, who admires the nice craftsmanship of the stolen jewels. First, as in the novel, he calls the boys “clever dogs” twice and then softly sings “fine fellows,” almost with affection. Taken quite literally from the novel, the episode is also present in Lean’s film, there with the additional suggestion of wartime black-market dealings on the part of the Jews.

Polanski’s more nuanced construction of Fagin is increased by the “distinctive grammar of the medium” (McFarlane 169), in other words by the fact that prolonged film sequences, with their expansion of dialogues and strategic close-ups of faces, lean towards forms of naturalistic behavior often at odds with the melodramatic accents of the source text. Two episodes, in particular, deserve a special mention as far as the different representational strategies and conventions of the two media are concerned. In the first one, which loosely corresponds to the opening of chapter 18, Fagin locks Oliver in an upper room and takes the opportunity to lecture him “on the crying sin of ingratitude” of which Oliver was clearly guilty:

Mr. Fagin laid great stress on the fact of his having taken Oliver in, and cherished him, when, without his timely aid, he might have perished with hunger; and he related the dismal and affecting history of a young lad whom, in his philanthropy, he had succoured under parallel circumstances, but who, proving unworthy of his confidence and evincing a desire to communicate with the police, had unfortunately come to be hanged at the Old Bailey one morning. Mr. Fagin did not seek to conceal his share in the catastrophe, but lamented with tears in his eyes that the wrong-headed and treacherous behaviour of the young person in question, had rendered it necessary that he should become the victim of certain evidence for the crown: which, if it were not precisely true, was indispensably necessary for the safety of him (Mr. Fagin) and a few select friends. Mr. Fagin concluded by drawing a rather disagreeable picture of the discomforts of hanging; and, with great friendliness and politeness of manner, expressed his anxious hopes that he might never be obliged to submit Oliver Twist to that unpleasant operation (137–38; ch. 18).

Where the ironic narrative voice resorts to indirect speech and, by means of this distancing device, constructs a vicious and ruthless Fagin, Polanski makes him speak the following monologue:
Fagin (coming into the room carrying a tray with some food):
Little something for your luncheon, my dear?
Shall we have a little chat?
Oliver?
Shall us?
I expect you'd welcome the sound of a human voice again, eh, my dear?
Ah! (He sits next to Oliver).
Do you know what I consider the greatest sin in the world, my dear?
Ingratitude.
And that’s what you are guilty of. Ingratitude.
We took you in, we cherished you, if we hadn’t, you might have died of hunger.
And how do you repay us?
You run away. You cry out for the police, you cause us great anxiety – and expense.
There was a lad once, just like you. I was a father to him. He ran away like you, he indeed went to the police. And can you guess how he ended up?
They hanged him – at the Old Bailey.
Certain evidence was made available, not all of it precisely true, but all of it necessary for my safety and that of my friends. Poor boy. Hanged.

The shift from indirect to direct speech emphasizes Fagin’s duplicity exposing, among other things, the ambivalence of his characteristic discourse marker – the vocative “my dear”/“my dears” he frequently uses to address Oliver and the other boys.

The second, fully invented sequence is an interesting example of plot mutation. Fagin attends to Oliver’s wound (caused by a failed break-in attempt in the company of Bill Sikes), placing some ointment on it that is “older than time” and “was handed down from father to son, father to son, and comes from – who can say where?” At this point in the film plot, Fagin has already decided that Oliver must die.

Fagin: There, my dear, you look as good as new.
How do you feel?
Oliver: Tired, sir.
Fagin: Well, yes, yes.
It’s long after midnight.
Shortly, you’ll sleep a good sleep – but my meaning was – how do you feel in yourself?
Oliver: Better, sir. But for the ache in my arm.
**Fagin:** Come sit. I have the very thing for such things as yours, my dear. Undo the bandage. Oh, it’s a nasty wound. But my magic will do the trick. You’ll see, my dear. This remedy is older than time. Yes, my dear, older than time. It was handed down from father to son, father to son, and comes from – who can say where?

**Oliver:** Thank you, sir, thank you. For your kindness. I’ll always remember it.

**Fagin:** Well, well, yes, always. Yes, always, my dear. But who knows how long that will be?

The major departure from the novel has to do with the word “kindness,” which is never used in reference to Fagin, but only to connote the positive world of Mr. Brownlow, Mrs. Bedwin and Rose Maylie. Here, instead, Oliver gets entangled in an extremely ambiguous play of seduction and guilt that risks turning him into a complacent victim. The theme of kindness is taken up again when Oliver visits Fagin in the condemned cell.

**Oliver:** Fagin, you were kind to me.

**Fagin:** Yes, yes. I’ll be kind. I’ll be kind again.

He hugs Oliver tightly.

**Oliver:** I’m not afraid.

**Fagin:** Oliver!

Let – Let me whisper to you. You remember the box, Oliver? With my pretty things for my old age, Oliver? It’s hid a little way up the chimney in the top front room. It’s yours, Oliver. Yours, but we must talk.

**Oliver:** Yes, yes. But shall we say a prayer together first? Do, say only one, upon your knees, with me, and we can talk all morning.

**Fagin:** Outside. Outside. You can say I’ve gone to sleep. They’ll believe you. You can get me out. The pretty things are yours, my dear, yours.

**Oliver:** Oh God forgive this wretched man!

The theme of kindness is related to the theme of ingratitude, which is filtered in the novel by the narrator’s ironic viewpoint. The film, instead, conveys a less judgmental but more disturbing sense of Fagin’s corruption and moral debauchery, represented as if they were now so deeply ingrained in his personality as to be almost involuntary and out of his control.

In what ways could we relate this exchange about kindness (absent in Dickens and Lean) to contemporary cultural anxieties and Jewishness, as it is rewritten by Polanski? In his tattered humanity, Fagin the Jew exhibits all
the perversion of a duplicitous kindness which attempts to bind the victim to the abuser through subtle forms of psychological violence. We all know too well the relationship between “kindness” and child abuse. Such an insistence on kindness, besides, could possibly be reminiscent of traumatic memories of the Holocaust (Kugelmass 1995) and resonant with the current political debate in Poland about the role played by Poles in protecting Jews against the Nazis in the country where the greater part of the Holocaust was perpetrated. It should be remembered that Polish Jews have sometimes been accused of ingratitude by Poles, who claim instead to have helped them during World War II, and also by members of the Catholic Church, including Primate Glemp, in the attempt to clear Catholic Poles of the accusation of anti-Semitism.

The debate, which is central to the country’s ongoing construction of a viable national identity and reformulation of its dark past, reverberated in the Polish press in the years 2001 and 2002, when new historical research revealed that the Jewish pogrom in the town of Jedwabne had been committed by the Poles and not by the Nazis (Polonsky and Michlic). The discovery reignited long-standing controversies and questioned the very nature of the country’s collective memory, pressing the Poles through public debate to face the painful burden of their own anti-Semitism and direct responsibilities in the Holocaust.

Whereas Lean’s Twist seems to capture the anxious need for the British people to restore its identity after the Second World War by removing the threat of the Other, Polanski’s adaptation, I suggest, performs the opposite symbolic move. It engages with the problematic issue of contemporary Polish identity, refracting it – somehow paradoxically – through the prism of Fagin, who is villain and victim at the same time. “At a time when the hunger for absolutes – unredeemable evil, the incorruptible truth, the certainty about our ‘way of life’ – is reasserting itself, Polanski stays powerfully true to Dickens’s intuition that the light and the dark are not to be kept apart from each other” (Connor).

“It hurts!” cries Fagin in his last moments, when Oliver leaves him in the condemned cell, waiting to be hanged the following morning. In the torment of Fagin’s trembling frame, Polanski’s adaptation adroitly captures the fundamental inanity of defensive self-representations and the need to admit one’s guilt and ask for forgiveness in order to attain some sort of redemption. If compassion is not denied (Oliver cries), justice is nonetheless invoked, as no amount of kindness and gratitude should remove the duty to face responsibilities, individual and collective. “What right have they to butcher me?” For a lasting moment the evil Jew and the persecuted Jew are indistinguishable. What more could we ask for from Oliver Twist?
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