"Continuities of consciousness"

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'The aim of this book is to tell a story about Dickens's role in the emergence of film, a narrative of consciousness across different media and across time' (13). And an enthralling story it is. I had been expecting this book to be a trudge through the myriad adaptations of Dickens to the screen; then, when quickly disabused of this, I expected a kind of update of Michael Chanan's book about pre-cinema in Britain, *The dream that kicks: the prehistory and early years of cinema in Britain* (London: Routledge, 1995). But no. Smith's narrative is ingenious, seriously original and so subtly and tightly argued for most of its length that a reviewer – this reviewer anyway – feels he'd rather quote from it than dissect it, give a sense of its flavour as far as possible unmediated by critical commentary.

Any account of the period leading up to the birth of cinema in the mid 1890s must of course take into account the technological possibilities in the climate of the times. Rejecting a simplistic teleology, Smith is alert to the full panoply of 19th-century life that was to provide a seedbed so conducive to the flowering of the cinema. In his assured, scholarly way, he invokes Plato and the cave, the camera obscura (important because "its effects can occur without the intervention of an apparatus of any kind" (21) – has anyone seen *A matter of life and death* (UK, 1946) recently?), the phantasmagoria, the magic lantern, the panorama and diorama: all attempts to give visual expression to aspects of human experience: and Smith argues that "Dickens was in the thick of this world of visual entertainment" (33). These were not merely precursors of the cinema; they were part of the climate that made thinking about representations of life in terms of moving images so receptive to what Méliès and the Lumière brothers were about to stun the world with.

When I wrote "part of the climate" above, I had in mind particularly 19th-century urban life, especially as manifested in London and Paris, the two great metropolises which helped to form Dickens's sensibility and gave food for his imagination. He in turn was, as Smith so admirably points out, hugely influential on the ways in which people came to think of the city. His evocation of London as a "labyrinth" can, in Smith's words, "create a response akin to that of leaving the cinema only to find the world outside flat and colourless" (63). He draws on passages from *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Oliver Twist* in convincing support of this notion, and will later praise David Lean's version of the latter for displaying "a complete grasp of the city as labyrinth, reproducing its sense of mythic horror and Freudian overtones..." (129).

Dickens's metaphor for Paris is that of the panorama, a place of "light and brilliancy" (75) and Smith goes on to argue with some subtlety that, though Dickens's fascination with these two cities produces imaginative fuel for reading the world in terms of dualities, we should not read their novelistic representations as crude binarisms. Nevertheless, he risks the generalisation that "labyrinthine London is full of movement, panoramic Paris is suffused with light; both are essential ingredients of cinema" (77). As to London, Dickens himself had referred to some aspects of its life as "shadows of the great moving picture", and, drawing on the observations of other 19th-century figures, such as Charles Lamb, Smith arrives at this conclusion:

...it is one thing for the cultural critic, brilliant as he may be, to make these connections after the event; it is quite another for this to be done by contemporaries in hinting at that which had not yet come into existence. (80)

The great strength of this often brilliantly resourceful and wide-ranging study is in its way of gathering up the threads of pre-cinema and weaving them into a fascinating narrative. Another strength is in the capacity for close reading of passages that seem to bespeak a "cinematic" imagination at work in Dickens. This is evident in the attention paid to an extract from *Pictures from Italy* in which Dickens offers "in the structure of sentences, an almost endless running on of one sight, image, picture into another, a grammatical montage which
makes the text a seemingly ceaseless flow" (90).

And the summarising account he gives of the dual heritage of cinema – in evolving technological innovations of the 19th century and in "the moral atmosphere of some central features of Victorian culture" (114) – ensures the book’s importance. Less persuasive perhaps is the account of Christine Edzard’s Little Dorrit (UK, 1988) as an example of a "failed" Dickens adaptation. Though Smith overtly rejects any notion of "fidelity" as a criterion in the judging of screen adaptation (and his praise for Lean’s Oliver Twist (UK, 1948), with its major restructuring is evidence of this), he seems to me to come dangerously near to this stance in his account of both Little Dorrit and Lean’s Great expectations (UK, 1946). By this I mean that I don’t think he allows the film-maker enough rope, enough right to grab what excites him in the precursor text and make something new from it. The issue of "equivalence of meaning of the forms" (122) sounds too often like a requirement being laid on the film-maker, and this doesn’t sit too easily with his otherwise very liberal ideas about adaptation: for instance, he very properly writes of the "tyranny of a fidelity which is at once mechanically reductive and frustratingly intangible" (122).

In the book’s "Epilogue", he compares Dickens with Orson Welles who once claimed that he "had started out wanting to be an American Charles Dickens" (182). Smith draws some illuminating parallels between the two: how they both knew critical rebuff in their times; they both had messy later lives; both steered courses between art and the vulgarly popular; and so on. However, this parallel, and it grows out of Smith’s unbounded admiration for each, surely founders on the fact that, whereas Dickens was a hugely popular author (and performer and populariser of his own work), Welles never enjoyed this sort of fame. He is indisputably one of the great masters of cinema, and though he lent himself to radio programmes and later to television advertising, he never was, as film-maker, a box-office draw remotely on the scale of Dickens’s reading audience then or later. Brilliant as his great films are, they lack the easy human access and warmth that made Dickens a best-seller.

The point of this comparison remains less fully achieved, is perhaps less fully achievable, than the wonderfully evocative account of the ways in which Dickens exemplifies the dreaming of cinema that occupies Smith in the first two-thirds of this book. This is something new, new in its scope, sometimes dazzling in the ways it pulls together snippets of perception about the popular arts of the 19th century which seemed to have everything going for them short of the actuality of the cinema for which they were laying the ground. Not many people writing about the cinema can draw so confidently on so diverse a scholarly background.

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