

# On the Cinematic Nature of Dickens' Writing Style in *A Tale of Two Cities*

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## Introduction

In reading Charles Dickens' historical novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, which was first published in 1859, my interest tended towards the work's visual quality as made manifest through various stylistic elements which could be termed the "cinematic" or "filmic" nature of the work. In this essay, the cinematic elements in the novel are analyzed as a means of pointing out just how much the work has in common with film.

First, it is necessary to describe generally what those cinematic elements are. In doing so I rely on the writings of the pioneer Soviet Russian film director, Sergei Eisenstein, especially his 1944 essay, "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today." In that essay, Eisenstein focuses primarily on various cinematic characteristics of Dickens' great social novel of 1838, *Oliver Twist*. In this same essay, incidentally, Eisenstein refers briefly to *A Tale of Two Cities*, after which he comments: "How many such 'cinematic' surprises must be hiding in Dickens's pages!" (214). Eisenstein's main point, however, is that one of the greatest achievements of the legendary silent film director, D.W. Griffith, was the development of the technique of montage, and that the inspiration for this development was actually Charles Dickens' novels. In fact, he goes so far as to state that Dickens' method of visual depiction was ahead of its time, producing a kind of cinematic expression long before the era of film.

This is some of what Eisenstein has to say in his essay on the subject: "Griffith arrived at montage through the method of parallel action, and he was led to the idea of parallel action by—Dickens!" (205). A few paragraphs later, he states:

Even a superficial acquaintance with the work of the great English

novelist is enough to persuade one that Dickens may have given and did give to cinematography far more guidance than that which led to the montage of parallel action alone.

Dickens's nearness to the characteristics of cinema in method, style, and especially in viewpoint and exposition, is indeed amazing. And it may be that in the nature of exactly these characteristics, in their community both for Dickens and for cinema, there lies a portion of the secret of that mass success which they both, apart from themes and plots, brought and still bring to the particular quality of such exposition and such writing. (206)

The French term, "montage," has two meanings. One is an editing method in which a series of unrelated shots are spliced together in a sequence, thereby producing a new meaning. This is also referred to as "Soviet montage." This method is often used in works such as Eisenstein's 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*. Meanwhile, the term is also used in the broader sense of the overall editing of a film. Here the shot is understood as the fundamental unit making up the film, defined as a single fragment of film in which action continues without interruption. According to James Monaco in *How to Read a Film*, the standard camera could be loaded with, at the most, ten minutes' worth of film, so that the longest possible shot would have been ten minutes. So a full-length film would be made up of anywhere from 500 to 1,000 shots (129).

Let us now turn to *A Tale of Two Cities*.

## 1.

The range of cinematic qualities in *A Tale of Two Cities* will now be examined, and exactly what kind of visual effects are used will be considered for each example. Please note that, for my analysis, print text is discussed here as if it were a cinematic element, while the cinematic focus is represented by the underlined portions of the text.

[Quotation A]

(1) Madame Defarge and monsieur her husband returned amicably to the bosom of Saint Antoine, while a speck in a blue cap toiled through the darkness, and through the dusk, and down the weary miles of avenue

by the wayside, slowly tending towards that point of the compass where the chateau of Monsieur the Marquis, now in his grave, listened to the whispering trees. Such ample leisure had the stone faces, now, for listening to the trees and to the fountain, that the few village scarecrows who, in their quest for herbs to eat and fragments of dead stick to burn, strayed within sight of the great stone court-yard and terrace staircase, had it borne in upon their starved fancy that the expression of the faces was altered. (2) A rumour just lived in the village—had a faint and bare existence there, as its people had—that when the knife struck home, the faces changed, from faces of pride to faces of anger and pain; also, that when that dangling figure was hauled up forty feet above the fountain, they changed again, and bore a cruel look of being avenged, which they would henceforth bear for ever. (169; numbers in parentheses and underlining are mine)

Section (1) describes the action in which Madame Defarge and her husband walk along the road towards their home in Saint Antoine. But then a separate, parallel action is occurring simultaneously as is expressed in the sentence, “while a speck in a blue cap toiled through the darkness, and through the dusk, and down the weary miles of avenue by the wayside.” In the language of film this is referred to as “cross-cutting.” What I would like to suggest here is that Dickens has a kind of cross-cutting sensibility through which he can subtly point to things in the larger world that are happening at the same time as things closer to hand. Another example in which this becomes evident will be discussed following analysis of section (2).

Section (2), interpreted visually, contrasts with section (1), in which the shot is taken from an omniscient point of view. Instead, this shot is from the subjective viewpoint, seeing things with the eyes of a particular character in the story. This is where the narrator describes “the stone faces” and how “the faces changed, from faces of pride to faces of anger and pain” and then to “a cruel look of being avenged.” Though the text speaks of externals, this change is actually an internal one. Dickens simply makes use of physical characteristics as a means of describing something which we cannot actually see – something going on in the hearts of the people.

The gradual change of the expressions on the stone faces is also reminiscent of montage as used in film. In Eisenstein’s most famous work, *Battleship*

*Potemkin*, which appeared in 1925, he took three separate shots of a lion – lying down with eyes closed, then partially standing with eyes open, and finally, standing up. These shots were then placed together in a sequence, so that it looks like the lion has gotten up from its original position. As part of a montage, this series of images becomes a metaphor in the film for the common people, who are now standing up to the Czar. The method of using a visual image in montage to represent something which cannot be seen, such as the will of the people, has much in common with Dickens’ use of the stone faces gradually changing.

Thus it seems that Dickens has made use of linguistic expressions much in the same way as various camera shots are used in a film to set up a variety of relationships between the viewer and its object. Of course, further research is necessary before definite claims can be made.

## 2.

The cinematic effect discussed in Quotation A (1) is almost replicated in Quotation B (1):

[Quotation B]

(1) And still Madame Defarge, pursuing her way along the streets, came nearer and nearer.

“If we ever get back to our native land,” said Miss Pross, “you may rely upon my telling Mrs. Cruncher as much as I may be able to remember and understand of what you have so impressively said; and at all events you may be sure that I shall bear witness to your being thoroughly in earnest at this dreadful time. Now, pray let us think! My esteemed Mr. Cruncher, let us think!”

(2) Still, Madame Defarge, pursuing her way along the streets, came nearer and nearer.

“If you were to go before,” said Miss Pross, “and stop the vehicle and horses from coming here, and were to wait somewhere for me; wouldn’t that be best?”

Mr. Cruncher thought it might be best.

“Where could you wait for me?” asked Miss Pross.

Mr. Cruncher was so bewildered that he could think of no locality

but Temple Bar. Alas! Temple Bar was hundreds of miles away, and (3) Madame Defarge was drawing very near indeed.

(...)

Afraid, in her extreme perturbation, of the loneliness of the deserted rooms, and of half-imagined faces peeping from behind every open door in them, Miss Pross got a basin of cold water and began laving her eyes, which were swollen and red. Haunted by her feverish apprehensions, she could not bear to have her sight obscured for a minute at a time by the dripping water, but constantly paused and looked round to see that there was no one watching her. (4) In one of those pauses she recoiled and cried out, for she saw a figure standing in the room.

(5) The basin fell to the ground broken, and the water flowed to the feet of Madame Defarge. By strange stern ways, and through much staining blood, those feet had come to meet that water.

Madame Defarge looked coldly at her, and said, “The wife of Evremonde; where is she?” (349-351; numbers in parentheses and underlining are mine)

In this section we see much the same effect as was demonstrated in Quotation A (1): the depiction of two things going on simultaneously in different places. Again, this is like the use of cross-cutting in film. Here, the narration alternates between two scenes – the first where Madame Defarge, attempting to murder Lucie Manette, hurries towards the house in which Miss Pross remains; and the second, where Miss Pross works out a scheme to leave Paris with Mr. Cruncher. What is interesting here is the repetition of the line describing Madame Defarge getting closer and closer, repeated in sections (2) and (3). These sentences are very short in comparison to the dialogue between Miss Pross and Mr. Cruncher. This may be at once a means of expressing how quickly Madame Defarge is walking and, in the longer sentences, how little progress is being made in Miss Pross’ attempts to leave Paris. The repetition of these two scenes, if we were to shift now to a visual medium, would likely be proportional to one another in terms of the time required for each shot.

One more point to be made is the contrast between the first two occurrences of the sentence describing Madame Defarge walking, and the third. In comparison to (1), “And still Madame Defarge, pursuing her way along the

streets, came nearer and nearer,” and (2), “Still, Madame Defarge, pursuing her way along the streets, came nearer and nearer,” the third occurrence, (3) “Madame Defarge was drawing very near indeed” is shorter. The structure of the sentence itself changes as the tempo speeds up, with Madame Defarge coming closer and closer to Miss Pross. If expressed visually we may again assume that the difference in length between sentences (1), (2) and (3) would be proportional in the case of shot length. In other words, Quotation B has the effect of causing the reader to become more and more anxious. Obviously, Dickens put a lot of thought into putting this series of sentences together.

In section (4), which opens with “In one of those pauses,” there appears yet another cinematic element. After Cruncher has left, Miss Pross washes her eyes, which have become red from crying hard, in a basin of cold water, when suddenly Madame Defarge appears. Then in section (5) the narrative continues: “The basin fell to the ground broken, and the water flowed to the feet of Madame Defarge.” The water here is described almost as if it were a living being, and is given a treatment much like a close-up in film. Dickens attempts to produce increasing excitement in the reader as he leads up to the fight scene. Here he inserts a moment of stillness – the water’s movement is expressed in a very tangible manner. In other words, it is a slow-motion shot that expresses what is invisible, that is to say, the tension between Miss Pross and Madame Defarge. At the same time, it is a scene in which an unexpected shift occurs, and of course, the expression here is, in my view, a cinematic one.

As an aside, the sentence “By strange stern ways, and through much staining blood, those feet had come to meet that water” works much like a flashback in film; while the phrase, “those feet had come to meet that water” uses metonymy, to refer to Madame Defarge herself. And here again, there is a close-up on the blood-stained feet meeting the water. This shot carries a metaphoric meaning, as one can interpret the meeting of the two women as a clash between the cultures of England and France. In any case, this section takes a highly visual approach to increase the sense of urgency in the reader’s mind.

### 3.

Thus far, in addition to montage, I have discussed Dickens’ utilization of other cinematic effects, such as cross-cutting, portrayal of an omniscient point

of view, indication of shot length through the use of longer or shorter sentences to represent temporal changes, and implication of the invisible through the description of objects.

Now let us look at Dickens' further use of cinematic devices:

[Quotation C]

(1) Deep ditches, double drawbridge, massive stone walls, eight great towers, cannon, muskets, fire and smoke. Through the fire and through the smoke—in the fire and in the smoke, for the sea cast him up against a cannon, and on the instant he became a cannonier—Defarge of the wine-shop worked like a manful soldier, Two fierce hours.

(2) Deep ditch, single drawbridge, massive stone walls, eight great towers, cannon, muskets, fire and smoke. One drawbridge down! “Work, comrades all, work! Work, Jacques One, Jacques Two, Jacques One Thousand, Jacques Two Thousand, Jacques Five-and-Twenty Thousand; in the name of all the Angels or the Devils—which you prefer—work!” Thus Defarge of the wine-shop, still at his gun, which had long grown hot.

(3) “To me, women!” cried madame his wife. “What! We can kill as well as the men when the place is taken!” And to her, with a shrill thirsty cry, trooping women variously armed, but all armed alike in hunger and revenge.

(4) Cannon, muskets, fire and smoke; but, still the deep ditch, the single drawbridge, the massive stone walls, and the eight great towers. Slight displacements of the raging sea, made by the falling wounded. Flashing weapons, blazing torches, smoking wagon-loads of wet straw, hard work at neighbouring barricades in all directions, shrieks, volleys, execrations, bravery without stint, boom smash and rattle, and the furious sounding of the living sea; but, still the deep ditch, and the single drawbridge, and the massive stone walls, and the eight great towers, and still Defarge of the wine-shop at his gun, grown doubly hot by the service of Four fierce hours.

(5) A white flag from within the fortress, and a parley—this dimly perceptible through the raging storm, nothing audible in it—suddenly the sea rose immeasurably wider and higher, and swept Defarge of the wine-shop over the lowered drawbridge, past the massive stone outer walls, in among the eight great towers surrendered!” (207-208; numbers in

parentheses are mine)

In part (1) of the sample text, which reads, “Deep ditches, double drawbridge, massive stone walls, eight great towers, cannon, muskets, fire and smoke,” Dickens draws up a list cataloguing each of the items represented. By simply listing the objects in this scene it becomes quite easy for the reader to visualize it. And that same method also produces the cinematic effect where single shots are accumulated one after the other. Each single shot is fairly short, as the camera shifts one at a time to the next shot. This is the impression which Dickens’ sentence creates. A finely spliced rhythm is produced as the camera shifts from one shot to the other, and this rhythm expresses the dynamic nature of the revolution. The following sentence, “Through the fire and through the smoke—in the fire and in the smoke, for the sea cast him up against a cannon, and on the instant he became a cannonier—Defarge of the wine-shop worked like a manful soldier, Two fierce hours,” shows a close-up of the dynamic figure of Defarge rising up out of the smoke and fire, a different texture in contrast with the surrounding inanimate objects such as the ditch, drawbridge, and tower.

The pattern of a series of short shots, as found in section (1), is repeated in close-ups of Defarge appearing in section (2) and again in section (4). The beginning of section (2), “Deep ditch, single drawbridge, massive stone walls, eight great towers, cannon, muskets, fire and smoke,” repeats the same items as were listed in section (1), except that the “double drawbridge” is replaced by a single. The visual rhythm is of the same nature as in section (1). However, the change from a double drawbridge to a single suggests that the revolutionaries have gradually made their way closer to the Bastille. The repetition of these almost identical series of short shots expresses the urgency and chaos of the revolution visually. This focus on the near at hand is then followed by the following line: “Work, comrades all, work! Work, Jacques One, Jacques Two, Jacques One Thousand, Jacques Two Thousand, Jacques Five-and-Twenty Thousand.” In this case, rather than switching between different shots, attention is shifted from one Jacques to 25,000, in one long, panoramic shot. Here the sentence structure itself gives us the feeling that the camera is rapidly shifting to a bird’s eye view, as if lifted up by a crane. Here again the sentence vividly illustrates the momentum of revolution. The reader’s attention is then almost immediately pulled back: “Thus Defarge of the wine-shop, still at his gun, which



had long grown hot.” This is a separate shot in which Defarge is now depicted in a grand scale. Then right away, in yet another shot, the narrator’s attention focuses on the gun, “long grown hot.”

The sense that the camera has panned from Defarge to the gun where the gun is mentioned does not come through in Yoshio Nakano’s translation. The Japanese sentence expresses it thus: “そんなふうにして、酒店のドファルジュは、すでに真っ赤に焼けた大砲を、まだ一心に射ち続けている” (72). Translated word for word, this reads: “Thus / Defarge of the wine-shop / already fully burning red cannon / still fervently keeps shooting.” (For some reason, Nakano chose to translate the word “gun” as “taiho,” which means cannon).

As mentioned, the sense of the gun being filmed with a close-up shot at the end does not come through in the Japanese as it does in the original. It is true, the first image that appears is “Defarge of the wine shop” and the second image is the cannon, which has already grown red-hot from firing, matching Dickens’ original. However, the translation finishes with the representation of Defarge, who “still fervently keeps shooting.” In effect, this much more literal, action-oriented image ignores the close-up focus on the gun in the original. Not only the word order but also the final image of the gun itself should be honored in order to preserve how the narrator’s perspective pans from Defarge to the gun. There is a clear sense that in Dickens’ mind, as he wrote this scene, the camera shifts to a separate shot. It is worth mentioning too that the same cinematic effect as that discussed above is also seen in the very similar series of images portrayed in section (4).

#### 4.

The following section illustrates how Dickens alternates between omniscient and subjective points of view, and even introduces a reverse shot to maintain the flow of narrative.

[Quotation D]

(1) The obscurity was so difficult to penetrate that Mr. Lorry, picking his way over the well-worn Turkish carpet, supposed Miss Manette to be, for the moment, in some adjacent room, until, having got past the two tall candles, he saw standing to receive him by the table between them and the

fire, a young lady of not more than seventeen, in a riding-cloak, and still holding her straw travelling-hat by its ribbon in her hand. (2) As his eyes rested on a short, slight, pretty figure, a quantity of golden hair, a pair of blue eyes that met his own with an inquiring look, and a forehead with a singular capacity (remembering how young and smooth it was), of lifting and knitting itself into an expression that was not quite one of perplexity, or wonder, or alarm, or merely of a bright fixed attention, though it included all the four expressions— (3) as his eyes rested on these things, a sudden vivid likeness passed before him, of a child whom he had held in his arms on the passage across that very Channel, one cold time, when the hail drifted heavily and the sea ran high. (23; numbers in parentheses are mine)

Here again, the cinematic character of Dickens' writing becomes apparent. As already mentioned, cinematic shots can be divided into two general categories – those that reveal an objective or omniscient point of view, and those that show a subjective point of view. The latter refers to shots taken from the point of view of one of the characters. Normally, a close-up shot of that character is inserted either immediately before or immediately after the subjective shot.

Visually speaking, part (1) of the quoted text is a shot taken from the omniscient point of view. Mr. Lorry is vividly described by the narrator as “picking his way” through the “obscurity” of the room, then unexpectedly coming upon the young lady he is seeking. Thus, in cinematic fashion, the camera follows the movements of Mr. Lorry, then, as if looking over his shoulder, captures the view of Miss Manette.

In text (2), the phrase “As his eyes rested on” suggests that the shot taken from the omniscient point of view switches to a subjective shot from Mr. Lorry's point of view. As the text continues, the reader discovers what Mr. Lorry's eyes beheld: “... a short, slight, pretty figure, a quantity of golden hair, a pair of blue eyes that met his own with an inquiring look, and a forehead with a singular capacity (remembering how young and smooth it was), of lifting and knitting itself into an expression that was not quite one of perplexity, or wonder, or alarm, or merely of a bright fixed attention, though it included all the four expressions....”

Two things should be noted here. First there is Dickens' use of a “reverse shot,” a cinematic technique in which shots of two characters, as they face each

other, are used alternately, creating a kind of tension which demonstrates to the viewer that something is going on between the two. Here Dickens states that Miss Manette's blue eyes met Mr. Lorry's own "with an inquiring look," after which Mr. Lorry's point of view is reverted to as he continues to gaze at Miss Manette. The second thing which is notable in this scene is the subtlety and nuance with which Mr. Lorry observes Miss Manette.

Seymour Chatman points out the following in his essay "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)":

Narratologists argue that a more correct and comprehensive account of description rests on temporal structure. As we have already noted, narrative proper requires a double and independent time ordering, that of the time line of the story and that of the time line of the discourse. Now what happens in description is that the time line of the story is interrupted and frozen. Events are stopped, though our reading- or discourse-time continues, and we look at the characters and the setting elements as at a *tableau vivant*. (Mitchell 119)

Despite what Chatman says, here, strangely enough, one does not get the impression when reading the description of Miss Manette that the story is "interrupted and frozen." The reason may be that the reader senses the narrative time of Mr. Lorry's own imagination. In the section quoted, verbs which express a state of being, such as "to be" and "to have," are not used, with the exception of "was" and "included," each appearing only once. Instead, present participles, such as "inquiring," "lifting" and "knitting" appear. So rather than the sense of being static, like a "*tableau vivant*," a more dynamic sense comes across, like a shot in a film.

Section (3) repeats the phrase found at the beginning of section (2), "as his eyes rested on." The reader's attention then shifts back from Miss Manette to Mr. Lorry, in much the same way as would happen in a film when switching to a different shot. Then the following text is inserted, creating a sudden shift to a very different kind of shot: "a sudden vivid likeness passed before him, of a child whom he had held in his arms on the passage across that very Channel, one cold time, when the hail drifted heavily and the sea ran high." Here, past and present, the human eye and the rough sea, are linked cinematically in a very

effective use of montage, connecting two very different images in a meaningful relationship. Using this method, a poetic image is attained much as it might be through visual images in a film.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to demonstrate the visual or cinematic quality of Dickens' writing style in *A Tale of Two Cities*. In summary, the main points are:

First we can see how effectively Dickens uses the method of cataloguing images in a simple list. These images are similar to short camera shots in a sequence of film, and produce a certain rhythm.

The next point is Dickens' tendency to repeat similar sentences in a pattern. Each of the elements appearing within these patterns seems to be in a proportional relationship in terms of time to single camera shots in film.

Another tendency that Dickens has is to express imaginary or non-visual elements, such as the thoughts of characters, in concrete or figurative terms.

In addition, visual images are often placed in a sequence whose order cannot be broken or rearranged. This method attains the effect of montage in film.

Dickens also employs the montage technique to combine images that are distant from each other, connecting them in a meaningful relationship, and attaining a poetic image.

Finally, Dickens utilizes the reverse shot, to suggest that something is occurring between two characters.

I believe the examples brought together here are enough to suggest the distinctly cinematic nature of much of the writing style in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. A similar argument has already been made by Sergei Eisenstein as regards *Oliver Twist*. In other words, what this suggests is that *A Tale of Two Cities*, which was written some twenty years later than *Oliver Twist*, was also ahead of its time, in making use of not only montage technique, as emphasized by Eisenstein, but also a variety of other cinematic modes of expression. It can be argued that, even though these two novels belong to two distinct genres, Dickens often introduced cinematic techniques in his writing long before the advent of film.

That such a "cinematic" approach was taken by other writers of this period

is quite possible, and a topic worthy of further research.

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