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‘Digitalizing Dickens: Adapting Dickens for the Bicentenary’

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“Dickens is relevant across time and also across countries.”[1]

Like Krook’s shop in *Bleak House*, the legacy left by Charles Dickens’s bicentennial is jumbled and mismatched. Indeed, Dickens 2012 seemed to take inspiration from this novel, as various and often seemingly disconnected narratives were woven together under one title. The public were confronted by exhibitions, documentaries, books, articles and adaptations, in appropriately Dickensian overabundance. Academics also paid homage to the bicentenary with major conferences, like “A Tale of Four Cities,” and the publication of numerous new works of Dickens criticism and biography, from Robert Patten, Michael Slater and Clare Tomalin, among others. However, such a rush of attention inevitably resulted in a disjointed intellectual landscape, as various interpretations competed with and undercut each other. Notably, claims of his specific importance to British cultural identity were complicated by rival assertions of Dickens’s ability to break down national barriers, his fiction a conduit to promote peaceful dialogue between countries. For Dickens 2012 was also a global phenomenon, with celebrations as geographically disparate as an exhibition of first editions and letters at the Reed Gallery in Dunedin, New Zealand (Dunedin City Council para 2 of 6), and a film festival of Dickens adaptations across multiple cities in China (Dickens 2012 para 3 of 10).

Dickens was repeatedly mediated through different and complex company agendas, which led adaptations of his work to incorporate institution-specific inflections. An example of the contradictory impulses competing for prominence during Dickens 2012 can be discerned by a comparison of two major British cultural institutions: the BBC and the British Council. The BBC tempered a celebratory enjoyment in Dickens’s work with a concern to make him accessible as entertainment for a mass audience with a mixed degree of prior knowledge. If this meant that much of their Dickens-centered programing assumed a tone indicative of a sardonically raised eyebrow, the British Council’s celebrations of Dickens 2012 were differently inspired to evoke quite Dickensian sentiment. The BBC’s programing was designed to cater to a diverse audience, and so assumed the task of reclaiming Dickens as a popular writer, rather than an elevated source of academic interest (as in *Armando’s Tale of Charles Dickens*, and *Mrs Dickens’ Family Christmas*). By joining the dots between his life and work and its reverberations within contemporary British society, the BBC tracked Dickens’s influence upon the cultural landscape of its audience (Dickens’s treatment of Christmas was given great attention, for instance). Ironically, drawing these parallels revealed that many people find Dickens challenging or difficult to relate to. The foregrounding of his modern resonance in Britain seemed to be considered necessary to translate his long-standing canonicity to be inclusive of, and appeal, to the BBC’s culturally diverse audience.

The British Council, on the other hand, sought to emphasize the potential of Dickens to act as a bridge between countries, rather than as an influence upon a particular national identity, in a manner that fitted their mission to build global relations through the dissemination of culture and education (British Council Website). Their Dickens Readathon was a remarkable testimony to his global appeal and dissemination. Fans from disparate countries were filmed reading aloud from the novels, in an event which covered twenty-four countries and twenty-four hours. The Council’s other projects included encouraging budding

writers in nations like Brazil, to take inspiration from *Sketches by Boz* and to "sketch" their own cities (John 504). Contending for Dickens's unifying potential also proved problematic, however, as it still offered only a partial and selective impression of his global appeal. The digital medium which enabled the Readathon project, for instance, was also a method of selection, for, in addition to the prior interest necessary to move people to contribute, it also demanded a certain degree of education and affluence – evident in its participants' access to the technology required for involvement. Moreover, one of the challenges faced by the British Council was how to promote a writer who is, like Shakespeare, often used as a means of characterizing the national cultural landscape, without implying a hierarchy. Much like The Great Exhibition of 1851, it had to mediate between extending the hand of friendship to "all nations" while, as a British institution, positioning Britain at the center of their imagined map of the world. Contradiction is thus both written into single appropriations of Dickens, as well as being a hazard of comparisons between them.

Despite the jumble, however, these disparate interpretations had one common theme: the assertion that Dickens is still relevant to the present day. As Claire Wood pointed out at *Dickens Day 2013*, a lot of the promotional material from the bicentenary sought to reinvigorate public interest in his work by marketing a younger, more vital, and un-bearded image of the author, whose works could be "rediscovered" as culturally potent (lecture). The creative brief for the Museum of London's major exhibition *Dickens and London*, for instance, stated that one of their "Key Arguments" would be that "Dickens's work remains relevant and popular today in Britain and around the world" (Museum of London 15). Moreover, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, in his address at the bicentenary wreath laying ceremony in Westminster Abbey, called Dickens "a great religious writer," whose commentary upon the human condition endures (Williams 113). The repeated claims of Dickens's "relevance" throughout the bicentenary revealed how central such a claim was to encouraging the public to re-engage with Dickens's work. It suggests that purveyors of these various adaptations were aware that many people find Dickens's lengthy tomes inaccessible, and sought to open the door through making his nineteenth-century context more immediately relatable. Such concerns reinforced the bicentennial's aim to be as inclusive of all community groups as possible. Nevertheless, while admirers of Dickens are likely to maintain what Philip Pullman calls the "worthiness argument," which considers adaptations as a gateway drug to their literary source, I believe that it was the adaptations themselves which formed the focal point of the bicentenary (qtd. in Hutcheon and O'Flynn 118).

The assertion that Dickens is still relevant is misleading. Indeed, Dickens's writing was sometimes even criticized in his lifetime for campaigning against social institutions which were already in the process of reform. Dickens's damning portrait of Chancery in *Bleak House*, for instance, arrived at a time when parliamentary Acts were being passed to help ameliorate the corrupt, outdated system. Nevertheless, his writing is still unambiguously responsive to the nineteenth century. To argue that Dickens is still relevant is to ignore the historical and social developments of the past two-hundred years, which have shaped how people respond to the texts. For instance, the cultural anti-Semitism in *Oliver Twist* is rightly considered utterly reprehensible in a world that has witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust; yet playbills for early stage adaptations of the text reinforce such prejudice, always drawing attention to Fagin's racial "Otherness" by describing him as: "a Jew Fence – fond of Plate and Pork Sausages" (Sadler's Wells playbill). I do not argue that Dickens's work has been uninfluential in shaping contemporary culture; however, I believe that being influential, or even applicable, is not equivalent to relevance. The danger of claiming that Dickens is relevant is the possibility that the subtleties of the original texts will be missed by imposing present-day concerns upon them, or, similarly, cause current affairs to be misunderstood. For

instance, when the then Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt presented each member of the Cabinet with copies of Dickens's works, and the Prime Minister was given *Hard Times* and *Great Expectations,* the *Daily Mail*'s comment – "how fitting" – seemed to be based on no more than the titles (Walford para 1 of 27). However, in asserting that Dickens is not, in fact, relevant, is also not intended as a negative comment upon the bicentenary celebrations. Dickens 2012 was truly remarkable for managing to be entertaining, interesting and inclusive. Indeed, my argument seeks to pay homage to the huge impact made by all of the various cultural institutions that adapted Dickens for the bicentenary. It was their work which allowed Dickens 2012 to achieve such a prominent cultural status, despite competition with the London Olympics and Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee. Thus I suggest that the "relevance" which these adapters claimed could be found in Dickens's original texts was in fact achieved by the creative reimagining of his work through adaptation. In directing their audiences to perceive Dickens's continued relevance, these adaptations simultaneously constructed it. So interpretations of the novels came to count for more than the original texts.

Adapting Dickens in a Digital Age

Dickens's multi-faceted novels inevitably inspire drastically different interpretations. It would be impossible for adapters to "transcode" his fiction exactly into another format and, indeed, they probably would not wish to (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 181). An adapter's choice of which element of Dickens's fiction to emphasize (the comedic or the gloomy social critique, for instance) allows him or her to use Dickens as a medium through which to make his or her own artistic or political statements. Further, an adapter's decision is also a telling indicator about what he or she believes the target audience will respond to. In his seminal essay "Dickens, Griffith, and The Film Today," Sergei Eisenstein argues a convincing case for Dickens's vital influence upon the development of the filmic technique of montage. Eisenstein criticizes the idea of film being an entirely new creative form, and rightly shows how any new medium must inevitably be just as inspired and directed by its cultural heritage as older forms of expression. Eisenstein draws attention to the particular qualities of Dickens's writing which came to inspire the ways that filmmakers wanted to tell their stories, yet, in so doing, he unintentionally reveals how our vision of the past is refracted through the lens of our particular cultural moment. As such, filmmakers may well read Dickens to be inspired by his narrative techniques, yet their reading experience incorporates an imaginative leap concerned with visualizing how Dickens's text might be conveyed onto the screen, which was certainly not a concern of his original readers. Similarly the imaginations of the general public are influenced by dominant cultural platforms, for the way that we are accustomed to receive entertainment and information affects our expectations, and so directs the ways in which we visualize new data. Dickens is therefore subject to interpretations mediated by both old and new forms of expression, impressions shaped by a cumulative amalgamation of images and knowledge. Thus a public exposed to such a plethora of Dickensian adaptations will necessarily use them as interpretive tools, treating the text like a character they are gradually coming to know.

"In his biography, John Forster tells us that during the George Almar adaptation of *Oliver Twist* at the Surrey [Theatre] in November 1838, Dickens left his chair and lay down on the floor of his box" (Cohen 128). Dickens was incensed not only by the cheek of adapters who co-opted his fiction for the stage, sometimes before he had finished writing the original, but also because he received no financial benefit, and often no credit, for works spawned by his literary creations. However, in addition to these more practical concerns, Dickens also felt that his work was cheapened by such unauthorized adaptations, which would often alter his novels almost beyond recognition (Cohen 127). Long and complex plots would be narrowed

into single-genre pieces; *Oliver Twist*, for instance, appeared in various guises as a "tragedy," a "melodrama" and a "comedy." Alternatively plays focused on the plight of a single character, and subsequently renamed the adaptation for them, as in *Smike* or *Little Em'ly*. Dickens felt victimized by stage adapters, and angrily exclaims through the mouthpiece of Nicholas Nickleby: "you take the uncompleted books of living authors, fresh from their hands, wet from the press, cut, hack, and carve them to the powers and capacities of your actors, and the capability of your theatres" (633; ch. 48). Each reinterpretation is in dialogue with both the original text and other adaptations, so personal responses of the public become similarly inflected by exposure to these points of comparison. Dickens was angry at the idea that his readers' impression of his works could be affected by other mediums, or directed by the interpretation of someone else.

In 2012 one can assume that Dickens's frustration with adaptations would be exacerbated by the multi-media platforms available for the dissemination of Dickens-themed products. Yet it was the availability of these various mediums which affected how the public engaged with, and consequently interpreted, his work at the time of the bicentenary. Although the authors of *Remediation: Understanding New Media* are right to stress, along with Eisenstein, that new media itself is simply a refashioning of old media, this process of development is still changing the source text into something entirely new through its remediation (Bolter and Grussin 15). The original material is subject to the limitations of the adaptive medium, and so is necessarily compressed and reformed into something distinct. The digital revolution is providing different media in which people can engage with their culture, and it is easier to discern and locate adaptations of work which fit the cultural experience desired by the consumer; thus expectations surrounding the availability and interactivity of cultural products are changing. Although *Fulfilled Expectations,* the report following the *Dickens and London* exhibition at the Museum of London is clearly a corporate production, which cannot recreate the experience of the exhibition itself, it is still demonstrative of the changing demands placed on curators. It states that people had called "for more opportunities to learn by doing and interaction with the exhibition space" (McIntyre 6). Interactivity is no longer an exceptional feature, but a normal and desired means by which consumers can engage. Although the wish to appropriate a beloved cultural product in order to connect with it more directly is not a new one – amateur reproduction of films and fanfiction existed before the Internet – the availability of the Internet now provides a space in which to display them, so making interactivity the norm. As such, interactivity can be interpreted as responding to individuals' desires to adapt the work for themselves, and so bring a text or object more in line with their individual interests.

Digital media have also given people a new power and the means of communicating directly with the producers of cultural products. Individuals or groups can now air their opinions freely and collectively achieve highlevels of exposure. This accessibility allows for a potentially more democratic cultural landscape, since genuine engagement with a text is seen as equally valid grounds for appropriation or adaptation as a multi-million pound investment in a franchise. Adaptations of Dickens occupy a slightly different terrain, however, since there is no way to convey the desire of readers into future works. Dickens is not just a popular literary product; rather through his canonicity, he represents a cultural landmark, a shared social property. Nevertheless, whatever form specialist adaptations take, they represent a similar desire to the more mainstream adaptations in *Dickens 2012*. For, by engaging in an act of appropriation, make Dickens applicable to their current tastes – reconstituting his novels to fit the experience they desire, rather than accepting the original texts as they are. Mainstream adapters must also try to anticipate their audience's changing desires, and so invent new ways to assert his cultural status. Quickly developing digital media

is thus changing the landscape of Dickens adaptations in ways that cannot yet be fully understood or foreseen.

Dickens's distaste for adaptations of his work is demonstrative of his desire to retain control over his texts and readers, but adaptation theorists, like Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon, have come to dismiss arguments that measure the worth of adaptations by their "fidelity" to the source text. *In A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon notes that adaptation can be defined as a "creative and an interpretive act," for, in being transcoded to a new medium or context, adaptations represent an entirely distinct cultural product from their source (8). Good adaptations aim to reveal new readings of the original, but the danger in this is that it is not guaranteed that these adaptations will reach a discerning audience, and thus might be interpreted as representative of their source. During the *Dickens and London* exhibition at the Museum of London, I carried out questionnaire-based research with the public. In my random sample of twenty people, fourteen confessed to being equally, or more, familiar with adaptations of Dickens than the original texts. The commissioned report following the exhibition also states that: "Whilst exhibition visitors tended to name intellectual motivations as their main driver for visiting, many also had secondary emotional and social agendas. Forty-two percent selected 'experience what the past was like 'as a motivation, and 42% selected 'an enjoyable way to pass the time' " (McIntyre 15). This, in addition to my own research, implies that the bicentenary inspired people who perhaps had little previous knowledge to find out more about Dickens and his era, and thus suggests that during 2012 many people would have gathered an impression of Dickens filtered through the various interpretations of adapters. One of the people I interviewed stated that: "Dickens is a part of general knowledge; everyone knows the characters without having read a book or watched a film" (Vox pop). However, in a digital environment that allows consumers to be selective about the type of cultural experience they want, one must question how "knowing" Dickens is defined. How far can representations of Dickens and his work stretch before they lose contact with their source?

This issue of adaptation is particularly pertinent to digital media. Successful franchises, like Harry Potter, use electronic products as parallel tools to the books and films to allow consumers to engage interactively with a process of what Clare Parody terms "worldbuilding" (212). Parody stresses the difficulty that franchises face in creating an interactive environment in which consumers can feel immersed, while retaining parameters that maintain the specifity of their particular imaginative worlds. She notes that often this comes to absorb paratextual material:

> Where franchise production is diasporic and development un-coordinated, canonicity, continuity, and authority become problematic concepts constantly re-negotiated; many franchise multitexts come together as an 'array' of versions, origin points, co-existing, overlapping, and contradictory narrative realities, rather than a master narrative and stable textual corpus. (212)

The genres of fantasy and science fiction are therefore more appropriate to this "worldbuilding," as the environments they evoke are more obviously fictional, and are thus more flexible to multiple imaginary responses. Dickens's oeuvre does not admit the same potential for franchise, as the novels are not consistent in their character base or environment. *Dickens 2012* represents a differently-charged imaginative space, for while there is undoubtedly a "Dickens industry," it is not subject to the monopoly of one company, and thus does not have the definitive "brand identity" of a franchise. This necessarily complicated the achievement of an overarching tone for *Dickens 2012*.

Digital media is an increasingly prominent form for the dissemination of cultural products, and thus if arguments for Dickens's relevance in 2012 were to be believed he had to demonstrate an adaptability to the way that modern audiences expect to receive information. Without the framework of an over-arching brand, digitization actually accentuated the ability of consumers to compare alternative adaptations rather than being absorbed by an experience that could be transferred across different products. Rather than expanding the opportunity for interactivity, therefore, crossing between media disrupted and challenged any single interpretation. Bicentennial adaptations thus entered a competitive market, in which the audience was engaged in an overtly comparative cultural landscape, as the lack of a definite "Dickens brand" meant that he could be more readily appropriated and absorbed by various company agendas. As such, the brand identity of the company producing the adaptation became central to the responses it generated. For instance, the public in general were less ready to question the validity of adaptations provided by places perceived to be educational institutions than they may have been of an independent filmmaker. Consequently the Museum of London's exhibition had the potential to command a high degree of influence over their visitors' responses to Dickens.

The tone of the exhibition achieved a feeling of immersion by employing various sensory effects. Visitors had the opportunity to listen to excerpts of cockney dialect, whilst looking at striking images of London in the 1850s and 1860s, projected onto a large screen. They were also able to traverse an impressionistic representation of Dickens's London, which drew out major themes from his life and work, before confronting the final piece. This was William Raban's specially commissioned film *The Houseless Shadow*, which integrated Dickens's reverberations with the present by overlaying images of contemporary London with a voice-over narration of Dickens's essay "Night Walks."[2] Raban's film was absorbed into the visitors' experience of the exhibition, and their response was therefore mediated by the context in which it was received. The film may have generated a different reaction during its screenings at various film festivals, but the educational context of the exhibition made the public interpret *The Houseless Shadow* as a documentary more than an individual artistic response to both Dickens and London: "The film shows Dickens is still relevant, we have the same problems now" (Vox pop). The bicentenary inspired many people to find out more about Dickens, and so the exhibition appealed to a diverse, although generally interested, audience. Engaging with a mostly non-specialist audience meant that the Museum's adaptation would have constructed a basis which many of the visitors carried forward into their subsequent interpretations of Dickens: "It made me appreciate Dickens further, as I learned much more about class disparity and other social issues" (Vox pop). The exhibition's representation of Dickens was constrained, like any other adaptation, by the limitations of its form, and thus had to adopt a distinct narrative in order to be coherent. However, the apparent objectivity of its educational format, in addition to the fact that it attracted "just under 100,000 visitors," meant that its interpretive lens created a huge impression on its visitors (Werner 2013).

Adapting Dickens for an App

The Museum of London also released an app as a promotional tool for the exhibition. Although *Dickens: Dark London* was intended for marketing purposes, its remediation of Dickens into a digital format also offers a pertinent case study for the consideration of adaptations of Dickens in 2012. Evolving beside *Dickens and London*, the app combined the exhibition's learning objectives by showing "how Dickens' engagement with the world around him influenced his works and how his concerns with social justice are still relevant today" (McIntyre 5). The app constructs Dickens's continuing social currency partially

through the process of transcoding his work into digital media, but further offers visitors another opportunity for interactivity complementary to the exhibition.

The app's adaptation of Dickens provides a dark and grimy vision of London. The main text for the app is taken from *Sketches by Boz,* although each edition comes with a short "bonus" clip selected from a variety of the novels. I was involved in the production of the app, contributing to the selection and editing of material, and writing captions that gave historical snippets to accompany the text. Frequently amusing, the *Sketches* were not an obvious choice of text to meet the specification of "dark" material, but were chosen because they were short and self-contained, and so more appropriate to the small-scale app world than the lengthy novels. Adapting Dickens for the app thus demanded a severely condensed version of Dickens, partly to adhere to what was appropriate for the medium, and partly in order to convey a particular interpretation about a specific aspect of his work. I was instructed to locate and then to edit those *Sketches* that would fit with the desired "dark" mood of the app, cutting the original text to lay emphasis on Dickens's gloomiest passages and remove comedic elements. One online reviewer complained that the app was "not about Dickens," and, indeed, involved as I was, the process of adapting Dickens in this way did seem to begin by removing him from the equation (Andybull para 3 of 8). Dickens's text became the filter through which to convey a particular impression of Victorian London, rather than acting as an introduction to Dickens's work. Indeed, Dickens would have proved impossible to contain in this particular digital medium. This shows that remediation is not straightforward, and that adaptations must be considered as separate from their source and appreciated on their own terms.

The Museum's learning objectives for Dickens and London were further emphasized by the app's prominent use of a map, which offers a comparative view between London in 1862 and the present-day. The map of London takes center stage by providing the opening screen for the app. The user can zoom in and out, and adjust the sliding scale at the bottom of the page so that these two distinct eras in London's history can be laid on top of each other like tracing paper. Released sequentially to mimic the experience of waiting for Dickens's originally serialized publications, each "edition" is plotted onto the map week by week.[3] The map further links to the device's GPS, allowing users to perceive how their current location has altered, and its relation to the text (if they happen to be in central London). Thus not only does this assert the centrality of London to Dickens's writing process, but it also makes an explicit link between Dickens's era and contemporary London – a connection which seems to be as easily accomplished as sliding the bar at the bottom of the screen. However, it simultaneously exposes the problems inherent in making a direct link. Transferring from the contemporary to the Victorian maps asks the user to make an imaginative leap into Dickens's era, a change that reveals a disjointed process rather than the smooth transition which the visual overlay suggests. Users must leap over the history of the past century and a half in order to draw a direct line back to Dickens's time, as they are asked to conform to the necessarily limited worldview of the app medium. Secondly, in foregrounding London as the centerpiece to Dickens's writing, the app undercuts claims for his continued cultural currency. If Dickens's contemporary London is inherent to his writing, then allowing the user to analyze how even the streets have changed in the intervening years prevents the direct transferral of his work to the modern day. Moreover, using a map from 1862 illustrates a further step of removal from the original texts. The app is chiefly based around selected narratives from *Sketches by Boz* (1836), yet between their original publication and 1862 London's topography altered drastically. Even the road patterns were changed as slums were demolished, suburbs sprawled out across previously green fields, and railway expansion tore paths through the city. Dickens himself described the chaos that such infrastructural changes created like "a great earthquake," when documenting the coming of the railway into Camden

in *Dombey and Son* (ch. 6). Therefore, despite its foregrounding of Dickens's context through the map, the imaginative link it creates between Dickens and the present-day is not straightforward.

The textual and temporal alterations, which distanced Dickens's original writing from the experience of the app, emphasize a process of recreation and thereby free the app to be something new and different. While the app could be an introduction to Dickens's work for some, interpretations of it should not be so limited. The "worthiness argument" implies a hierarchy which affords status based on the seniority of the medium: books are often considered superior to their film adaptations because of their long-proven cultural weight, and thus new digital media must inevitably come far down the food-chain (Pullman qtd. in Hutcheon and O'Flynn 118). However, such hierarchies are reductive and do not admit the potential of digital media for conveying cultural and educational products. One major difference between the original texts and the app, then, is that while its source is the result of a single creative imagination, this adaptation is a collaborative piece, and so the app is able to act as a vehicle for the exhibition of several new creative works.

The illustrations for the app were produced by David Foldvari,[4] who worked from George Cruikshank's original illustrations, nineteenth-century engravings and photographs (for example, Gustave Doré's engravings of London's East End), and developed them into the style of a graphic novel. Foldvari's illustrations also responded to the specification of "darkness," and so he selected subjects designed to chill the user: ragged children, haggard and hollow-cheeked adults, and famished animals, set against a gloomy and dilapidated environment (See Figure 1). Although historians at the Museum asked Foldvari to edit his illustrations to comply with a degree of historical accuracy – for instance, changing his original drafts so that people were represented smoking clay pipes rather than cigarettes – verisimilitude was not the app's mission objective. For people interested in using multimedia to deepen their understanding of Victorian London, the app provided "hotspots" which could be tapped to reveal supplementary information. These, too, were written with a general audience in mind and allowed the user to control the level of immersion either by looking at them or by ignoring them. Foldvari's tour of "Dark London" was enhanced by evocative sound-effects and the voice-over narration of Mark Strong, who employed a grave, worldweary tone. Although editing the text for the app seemed to necessitate the removal of Dickens's own voice, Foldvari reintroduces him as a character by including him unobtrusively in the illustrations, a quiet observer of the very scene the user is also viewing. This figure, as the voice of Strong and the artwork of Foldvari make clear, was that of a jaded, middle-aged man, rather than the lively young author who published *Sketches by Boz* in 1836 (See Figure 2).

Although the app is interactive, inasmuch as it allows users to direct the extent to which they choose to delve into the extra material, it still provides a narrative experience. This transcoding, which responds to a more "traditional" form of adaptation, takes story-telling as its main focus, as opposed to the "worldbuilding" of online franchises, or the problem-solving of video games, and therefore demands different skills from the user. Similar to reading a text, the user must be prepared to question the fictional world of the app. Analysis of my questionnaire research revealed overwhelmingly that many people regard Dickens's work as a historical source capable of providing an accurate window onto the past. In response to the question: "Do you think Dickens represents a significant part of England's cultural heritage?" only one person did not comment that Dickens gives a "realistic portrait of his time" (Vox pop). The exhibition promoted the idea that London was Dickens's muse, and sought to deepen its visitors' understanding of this environment in order to provide a context against which his novels could be judged. Nevertheless, the exhibition's presentation of London was necessarily selective: in order to adapt Dickens's work into a coherent narrative,

"dark" Dickens was chosen to set the tone, then certain major themes resonant in Dickens's work were elucidated (i.e. "Home and Hearth," "Popular Entertainment," "Childhood," and "Death").

The "hot-spots" on the app, which provide captions of supplementary historical information and photographs, also subscribe to this "dark" interpretation of the period, and, similarly, people may be drawn to interpret Dickens through this lens because it is presented under auspices of the Museum. By promoting the same narrative mood, the app and the exhibition work collaboratively, each adding another layer of depth to the other by representing a choice of cultural experiences, while still reinforcing the same message. My questionnaire asked: "How would you describe Dickens's writing after seeing this exhibition? Is it different to how you understood him before?" Nineteen out of the twenty people I interviewed felt that they had a better understanding of Dickens's context after the exhibition. They also accepted its dark mood as historically accurate, noting how they were most impressed with this aspect of the exhibition. I do not dispute the veracity of the exhibition's information; however, many of the visitors interpreted the "dark" mood of the exhibition as representative of the nineteenth century. If, therefore, the app's marketing had been successful in drawing visitors to the exhibition, its own gritty imagery would have been reinforced and confirmed by the exhibition. This, in conjunction with the exhibition itself, demonstrates the impact that adaptations had in directing public interpretations of Dickens in 2012.

Night Walking With *The Houseless Shadow*

Dickens and London had to navigate the challenge of mediation between exhibiting material artifacts, each with its own narrative about the Victorian era, and Dickens's fictional retelling. The exhibition paid tribute to this disparity through evoking a dream-like atmosphere in the first section of the space. The moody lighting and palette of dark blues, greens and browns evoked the strangeness and unfamiliarity of viewing a well-known area at night (or through the distorted lens of fiction). Also seemingly random collections of letters hung from the ceiling, only forming into words as attendees moved around the space. Foldvari's illustrations for the app echoed this sensation. Building upon copies of photographs, Foldvari moves between objects which can be treated as historical sources and the unreality of a world embellished by imaginative rendering. However, the final section of the exhibition, "Dickens' Legacy," undercut this dreamy atmosphere by foregrounding Dickens's social criticism, and drawing parallels between the issues he discusses and contemporary social problems. Positioned immediately prior to the exit, the final information panel was pointedly inclusive: "Dickens's words still challenge us today" (Werner 2012). This meant that not only did visitors leave the exhibition with an assertion of Dickens's contemporary resonance at the forefront of their minds, but perhaps "challenged" the public to read, or re-read, a Dickens work for themselves.[5]

"Dickens's Legacy" featured a specially commissioned film by William Raban, entitled *The Houseless Shadow*, which proved popular with the public: "the high occupancy levels here (23 visitors on average) and relatively long dwell time (13 minutes) suggests that most visitors were highly engaged with *The Houseless Shadow* film." The majority watched the whole sequence, with visitors often waiting outside "for the next screening or coming in half way through and staying until the film looped back to the point they joined" (McIntyre 28). Raban employed a voice-over narration of Dickens's "Night Walks" essay against images of contemporary London at night. Inspired by Dickens's narrative, Raban collected images of homeless people asleep in doorways, drunken fights and damp and lonely streets:

> The methodology was simple. Whenever Dickens refers to a particular place, I filmed in that same location – as it is now. Other times his descriptions are more general, so I allowed myself freedom in anchoring those passages to locations I had chosen. Like Dickens, I set out at half past midnight and returned by 05.30. Sometimes I only went to one location. I developed a map of all the places that matched the various parts of the text. (Raban 2012)

However, while the creative brief for Raban's film states that its first "Learning outcome" will be for visitors to "gain increased knowledge and understanding of how Dickens fits into modern culture and how his works continue to be relevant today," it drew attention to the differences between our social landscape and that of Dickens's (Museum of London 15). In "Night Walks" Dickens appears to observe homeless people with contradictory emotions, at first seeming to identify with their loneliness as he characterizes himself in inclusive terms as "the houseless shadow" (151). Yet despite a repeated desire for "company" (150), he never speaks to any of them. Rather, "Night Walks" seems to assert the impossibility of connecting with other people as London is transformed by night into a nightmarish spectacle. "[T]he very shadow of the immensity of London seemed to lie oppressively upon the river" (151). Nevertheless, as the essay progresses it becomes more and more evident that Dickens is selectively directing his reader's gaze, and so consciously constructing the city he wants to represent: "I knew well enough where to find Vice and Misfortune of all kinds, if I had chosen; but they were put out of sight, and my houselessness had many miles upon miles of streets in which it could, and did, have its own solitary way" (157). Dickens draws an unstable map of London in "Night Walks," frequently leaping vast distances between landmarks, or losing himself in a labyrinthine tangle of streets. So instead of making specific cases for social reform, as the film suggests, Dickens's geographical ambivalence creates an image of London made mysterious and unpredictable by night.

Although Dickens's unspecific meandering remains highly idiosyncratic, describing London in such uncertain terms allows him to imaginatively claim the entire landscape by disorientating readers and making them view it on his terms. As such Dickens is able to cast London as a physical manifestation of his consciousness – a suitably epic stage upon which he projects his musing. This is made evident when Dickens strays into an empty theater, and uses the space as a metaphor for his own mortality. Standing on the stage "with the rows of faces faded out, [... I] looked over the orchestra – which was like a great grave dug for a time of pestilence – into the void beyond" (151). Dickens's walk thus reflects a psychological journey, and both the scene and its homeless inhabitants are appropriated as aspects of a psychological map. Dickens is not writing to elicit sympathy for the homeless, but using them to increase the sense of loneliness and exposure which he feels during his personal journey. Unlike his descriptions of specific areas – Jacob's Island in *Oliver Twist*, for example – Dickens is not trying to present "Night Walks" as a faithful representation of London and its social problems, but instead showing how important the act of walking was to both his sense of self and his art. Although simultaneously allowing him to direct the attention of his readers to the homeless figures he observes, walking enables Dickens to construct a narrative persona, defined by knowledge of London gained over the years. As a result, Dickens can confidently assert his position as an urban documenter even while he manipulates his descriptions of London to reflect personal anxieties.

The difference between *The Houseless Shadow* and "Night Walks" makes evident Raban's adaptive process. "[M]y method was very much to be nonillustrative with the picture and text relationships – rather I wanted the two to work in an evocative way" (Raban 2013). The effect is to reveal harrowing, and frequently ignored, details about contemporary London. Yet the images are so striking, they create an impression that Dickens's social

commentary is foregrounded in the text as Raban's film illustrates corollaries between "Night Walks" and images of modern city. This allows Raban, like Dickens, to portray a selective and stylised vision of London through his editing. Raban admits that, while inspired by the text, he was also interested by the new and supplementary narratives that his film could convey:

> How do I feel my narrative lens compares to Dickens's voice? For the most part, I think I went for shots that would take the voice – some shots do this better than others. Sometimes, the shots have their own little narrative going on in them, like the man on drums with the couple snogging in the background, or the man and woman meeting at St Pancras Station at 4.00 in the morning. (Raban 2012)

Thus despite the parallels that emerge between modern and Victorian London, visualizing these sub-narratives also allows Raban to make explicit their differences. The scenes that Raban presents are frequently populous, whereas Dickens's introduction to "Night Walks" describes the process of a city falling asleep. In Dickens's rendering he is witness to a secret world whose only inhabitants are completely destitute or criminal, whereas Raban's film documents a mix of people, whose presence in the nocturnal city need not invoke suspicion.

In spite of the disparity between elements of Raban's film and Dickens's text, however, analysis of the responses I received indicated that Raban's film had compelled viewers to accept Dickens's topicality:

> 'We are still struggling with the issues he writes about.'
> 'The issues he deals with still continue.'
> 'He is still relevant. Even more so at the moment – the hopelessness of modern times, increasingly hard times, they are becoming more and more similar to what Dickens describes.' (Vox pop)

This acceptance of Dickens's currency reflects a trend in visitors' approaches to the exhibition in general. Overwhelmingly, people responded through the prism of personal experience, giving subjective reasons for what seemed most likely to stir their interest. "I love Dickens, but I was also interested to come because my grandfather was alive during Dickens's lifetime," one visitor wrote. Others cited specific London associations as the mainspring of their interest, unlike tourists, who tended to have a more general interest in London's history (Vox pop). By drawing attention to current social problems, Raban's film thereby constructed another way for visitors to interpret contemporary vitality from Dickens's work.

Continuing Relevance?

Dickens 2012 was characterized by paradoxes and multiplicity, interpretations which overwrote and contradicted each other. In this competitive terrain, what was the value of casting Dickens as relevant to contemporary society? Another study would be necessary to analyze the bicentenary's contribution to nation-making projects during a year in which Britain celebrated the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and hosted the Olympics in London. However, the bicentenary was also a global phenomenon, and any assessment of Dickens's relevance cannot be limited to an Anglo-centric narrative. Perhaps asserting Dickens's "relevance" in 2012 signifies nothing more than the wish of readers to feel connected to an author they admire**.** Linda Hutcheon hinted at such a conclusion in her first edition of *A Theory of Adaptation*, noting that part of the pleasure in adaptations comes from "repetition

with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (4). Five years later, in her preface to the second edition of her book, she conceded that the growth of multimedia platforms had rendered her conclusion too limiting.

For Robert Stam, who evokes an evolutionary metaphor, adaptations can serve a useful role. "If mutation is the means by which the evolutionary process advances," he argues, "then we can also see filmic adaptations as 'mutations' that help their source novel 'survive'" (3). This may be true for adaptations of lesser-known authors, but it is not applicable to Dickens, whose canonical status remains unchallenged regardless of the bicentennial flurry of adaptations. However, it was the adaptations of his work that both created and reinforced claims for his continued relevance in 2012. Adaptations introduced Dickens to a new global context, as in Ayeesha Menon's *The Mumbai Chuzzlewits*. Adaptations also allowed Dickens to be used as a platform to comment on British society, as in Raban's *The Houseless Shadow*. Yet while these appropriations of Dickens's work may affect how a particular generation chooses to respond to the original texts, the interpretive lens they create does not endure. These adaptations respond to their own cultural moment; and as society moves on, Dickens continues to be reinterpreted and adapted in reference to current events. Since producing *The Houseless Shadow*, Raban has again chosen to employ Dickens as a means of social commentary. His most recent film *Time and the Wave* uses Dickens's essay "Trading in Death" on the soundtrack whilst running scenes of Margaret Thatcher's funeral. Nevertheless, adaptations create their own legacy – *The Houseless Shadow* has entered the Museum of London's archives, for instance – and so will come to be interpreted as a relic of our time. Therefore, while adaptations may create relevance out of Dickens's texts, they cannot maintain such a claim for themselves. Adaptations were the key to the rediscovery of Dickens in the bicentenary, but ultimately he remains inimitable.

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[1] From interviews with the public at the *Dickens and London* exhibition at the Museum of London, 9 December 2011 to 10 June 2012.
[2] William Raban is a British experimental filmmaker, artist and Professor of Film at the London College of Communication. Raban has made over forty films, which are often focused on London, and exhibited widely.
[3] Currently, five “Editions” are available. For details, see http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Resources/app/Dickens_webpage/iindex.html
[4] David Foldvari is a Hungarian-born illustrator linked to Big Active, a creative consultancy. “David’s work is bold, darkly humorous and often political in tone” (Big Active para 2 of 2). He has lived and worked in Britain for the past twenty years.
[5] Alex Werner, the curator of Dickens and London, stated that: “One my aims for the exhibition was that visitors would after visiting the exhibition read a Dickens work rather just view one of the latest TV adaptation.” It seems that the exhibition achieved this, as the Museum’s shop “had to keep restocking Dickens titles as they were selling out almost on a daily basis especially the collection of essays that included Night Walks but also other classics like *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*” (Werner 2013).