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Screening *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens, 1843): Adaptation as Completion

Réaliser *A Christmas Carol*: l'adaptation filmique comme achèvement

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Cet article se penche sur la relation singulière qu'entretient le cinéma avec le *Christmas Carol* (1843) de Charles Dickens. En effet, l'histoire de la rencontre d'Ebenezer Scrooge avec les esprits de Noël a été adaptée, condensée, réécrite, et modernisée à l'écran plus que n'importe quel autre roman de la littérature anglaise ou américaine. Pourquoi le cinéma est-il si attiré par cette histoire en particulier ? Bien que la dimension mythique de l'histoire explique en partie sa persistance dans le temps, je pense que la fascination exercée par le *Carol* sur le médium filmique est liée au dispositif spectaculaire (une série d'images hyper-réalistes projetées à Scrooge) déployé par les esprits de Noël afin de transformer le vieil avare. Car qu'est-ce que *A Christmas Carol* sinon un texte sur l'expérience cinématographique d'un personnage ? D'une certaine manière, on pourrait dire

que Dickens a écrit son conte en imaginant un médium pas encore disponible à l'époque victorienne. Par conséquent, faire du *Carol* un film ne consiste pas seulement à l'adapter dans le sens traditionnel du terme, mais littéralement à le rendre complet et concrétiser son potentiel, ce qui peut expliquer pourquoi il est si satisfaisant de regarder une adaptation filmique du conte, quelle que soit la qualité intrinsèque du film.

This paper investigates cinema and television's peculiar 'love story' with Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Indeed, the story of Scrooge's life-changing encounter with the Christmas Spirits has been adapted, revised, condensed, retold, and modernized on screen more than any other work of English or American literature. Why is cinema so attracted to this particular piece? Although the mythic quality of the tale partly explains its persistence over the years, I believe that the interest exerted by the *Carol* on the film medium has a lot to do with the spectacular apparatus (a series of highly realistic images projected to Scrooge) displayed by the Christmas Spirits to redeem the old miser. For what is the *Carol* if not a text about a character's personal cinematic experience? The tale contains 'techniques' that would only be developed in cinema, as if Dickens was writing a story to be told by a medium not yet available in the Victorian age. As a consequence, turning the *Carol* into a movie is to not only 'adapt' it in the traditional sense of the word, but to literally complete it (in the sense of achieving what Dickens had started) and fulfill its potential, which may explain the satisfying nature of watching a film adaptation of *Carol*, regardless of the inner quality of the film itself.

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- I base this claim on Michael Patrick Hearn, *The Annotated Christmas Carol*, New York: Avon Books, 19 (...)

Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) presents a unique case in literature in general, and in literary criticism in particular. Most of Dickens's works have been adapted to different media, yet none has been redone more than the *Carol*. The story of Scrooge's life-changing encounter with the Christmas Spirits has been adapted, revised, condensed, retold, parodied, and modernized more than any other work of English or American literature, Shakespeare's included.¹ In Great-Britain, every conceivable medium has been employed in telling the tale, from a pantomime by Marcel Marceau to an opera sung by Sir Geraint Evans, and there have been Ebenezer Scrooges for every possible taste. Knights of the theatre such as Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, and Alec Guinness all interpreted the role on the radio, John Gielgud did it on record, and Patrick Stewart—better known as *Star Treks's* Jean-Luc Picard—performed the part in his 1990s reading tours. In America, where *A Christmas Carol* is equally beloved, Dickens's miser was, for many years, portrayed on the radio by Lionel Barrymore, Orson Welles and Basil Rathbone. It is impossible to estimate how many adaptations of the story have been performed by schools, church groups, and legitimate theatre companies since the book's publication for Christmas 1843. However, it is on TV and cinema that the tale has really flourished. In the silent era, at least twelve film versions of the *Carol* are known, starting with 1901 *Scrooge, or Marley's Ghost*, a short subject from pioneering British filmmaker Walter R. Booth. Among significant versions, Thomas Edison's adaptation in a 1910 short starring Charles Ogle in the role of the miser, and 1913 *Scrooge* starring Sir Seymour Hicks (who later reprised his role in 1935) can be listed. After the arrival of sound, Hollywood and British studios regularly adapted the *Carol*. The most prestigious versions number a lavish 1938 MGM production starring Reginald Owen, 1951 *Scrooge* (dir. Brian Desmond-Hurst), starring Alastair Sim; 1970's big-budget musical *Scrooge* starring Albert Finney; Richard Donner's *Scrooged* (1988), in which Bill Murray plays Frank Cross, a heartless network executive working on an all-star production of *A Christmas Carol*; 1992 *The Muppet's Christmas Carol* (dir. Brian Henson), starring Michael Caine as Scrooge and Kermit the Frog as Bob Cratchit. More recently, Jim Carrey played the title-part in a motion capture 3D Walt Disney production directed by Robert Zemeckis (2009).

2 On TV, many memorable adaptations of the *Carol* have been produced: a representative sampling would include a 1943 version directed by George Lowther; *Dickens's Christmas Carol* (ABC) in 1948; *The Christmas Carol* (1949) with Taylor Holmes as Scrooge; NBC's 1951 Fireside Theatre production starring Sir Ralph Richardson as Scrooge; Shower of Stars' 1954 *A Christmas Carol* on CBS starring Fredric March and Basil Rathbone; NBC's 1956 *The Stingiest Man in Town*, starring Basil Rathbone; NBC's 1962 *Carol for Another Christmas*, starring Sterling Hayden; ABC's 1979 *An American Christmas Carol*, set in the Depression, starring Henry Winkler; 1997 *Ebenezer* with Jack Palance in a Western movie film variation, and Clive Donner's *A Christmas Carol* (1984) starring George C. Scott.

- 2 One of the funniest and most memorable ones is *Blackadder's Christmas Carol* (BBC, December 1988). E [\(...\)](#)

3 Rare are the TV shows that do not include a special Christmas episode based on the *Carol*. *Alvin and the Chipmunks*, *Bewitched*, *Fat Albert*, *The Flintstones*, *The Simpsons*, and *Beavis and Butt-Head*, all lent their characters and diegetic universe to a re-imagining of the Dickens tale.² Among famous TV cartoon characters, Mr Magoo (*Mr Magoo's Christmas Carol*, 1962), Bugs Bunny (in the 1979 *Bugs Bunny's Looney Christmas Tales*), or Scrooge McDuck (in the 1993 *Mickey's Christmas Carol*, which casts other famous Disney characters in the *Carol*'s traditional roles) all 'played' the part of Scrooge. As Paul Davis notes, 'On television the *Carol* melds so seamlessly with media mythology that translations of it can be seen as "The Andy Griffith Show," "WKPR in Cincinnati," "Fame," "Family Ties," "Moonlighting," and perhaps most aptly, "The Ghost and Mrs Muir"' (Davis 216). Michael Pointer also underlines this phenomenon: 'Because *A Christmas Carol* has become an institution, the regular characters in a successful situation comedy series can be fitted with very little difficulty into the various roles in the famous tale, and when that has been done, the parody has virtually written itself. The behavior of the characters is predictable, and the comedy is generated from the universally known situations in the story into which they are plunged' (Pointer 99).

- 3 An excerpt can be found in Leo Braudy, Marshall Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*, Sixth Edition, Ox [\(...\)](#)
- 4 When Griffith proposed to his employers the novelty of a parallel 'cut-back' for his first version [\(...\)](#)

4 Although these remarks are true, they do not provide any explanation as to why Dickens's Christmas tale has been so frequently turned into films and TV movies. Why does the *Carol* seem to readily lend itself to adaptation and more particularly to cinematic adaptation? What makes watching the *Carol* such a particularly satisfying experience, regardless of the intrinsic quality of the film itself? Many reasons can explain the attraction of the cinematic medium to Dickens's writings in general. The most likely reason of all, namely that Dickens's style is highly cinematic and that he has foreshadowed important cinematic techniques is now

a commonplace of literary criticism. Russian director Sergei Eisenstein has famously contributed to this argument with his essay 'Dickens, Griffith and the film today'.³ Prompted by a remark by Griffith about the influence of Dickens on his direction,⁴ Eisenstein turned to the novels, where he found 'abundant evidence of the film indication of Dickens in his use of close-ups, dissolves, frame composition, "the alteration of emphasis by special lens," "cut-backs," parallel editing, and a basic montage structure that, in viewpoint and exposition, was very close to the cinema' (Paroissien 73). This claim, however, has been challenged by more recent scholars, not entirely convinced by the validity of a parallel between a nineteenth-century writer and a twentieth-century medium. For film theorist Brian McFarlane,

The idea of Dickens's amenability to the film medium dies hard. It has had almost mythic status since Eisenstein all but enshrined Dickens as the forefather of cinematic narrative. One sees in a general way some of his points (e. g. that he found in Dickens the basis for Griffith's idea of parallel editing) but closer scrutiny of aspects of Dickens's style suggests that many of his effects are indissolubly linked to the verbal medium. (McFarlane 105)

5Although I would here agree with McFarlane as far as his general argument is concerned, I believe that *A Christmas Carol* does share an intimate link with cinema, most importantly because, although Dickens died before the official birth of cinema, he experienced at an early age the Magic Lantern and its 'fantastic' version, Phantasmagoria, which both constitute cinema's direct ancestors and whose apparatuses are at the core of the conversion process in the *Carol*.

A Christmas Carol as a (Pre-)Cinematic Text

6Some critics have drawn a parallel between Scrooge's relationship with the Spirit's spectacular visions and theatre. Robert Tracy writes: 'their rapid and sometimes magical change of scene, and the sudden dissolution of walls or other barriers to reveal what is passing within, imply that Scrooge's Spirits have access to the most sophisticated machinery of the contemporary theatre. [...] The magic of the Spirits is the magic of the Victorian theatre' (Tracy 121). But this comparison is only partially fitting as the Christmas 'show' attended by Scrooge is not 'live' but made up of images which belong to another temporal dimension (even in the case of the images of Christmas Present, which are actually images of the future as they 'belong' to the day after the Spirits' visit to Scrooge). As the Spirit of Christmas Past remarks, 'These are but the shadows of the things that have been, [...] They have no consciousness of us' (Dickens 71).

- 5 The Masque was a theatrical performance combining text, elaborate

costumes, music, dance, and spect [\(...\)](#)

7For R. D. Butterworth, the Spirits' spectacular machinery evokes the Masque, a form of allegorical parade very popular in Elizabethan England whose main characteristic was to undermine the logic of spectacle itself by giving the spectators the possibility to directly intervene in the show.⁵ This parallel is interesting as it is true that, in the *Carol*, Scrooge does not 'simply' watch the images shown by the Christmas Spirits as a passive spectator; instead, he is projected within the images themselves. Thus, when the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge to see visions of his childhood, the narrator notes that 'they passed through the wall, and stood upon an open country road, with fields on either hand. The city had entirely vanished' (Dickens 70).

8But the Masque remains a theatrical form in that it unites actors and spectators in the same space and time frame. As I wrote above, in the *Carol*, Scrooge cannot interact with the images shown by the Spirits. More than theatre and the masque, I believe that the images displayed by the Spirits in *A Christmas Carol* have something to do with cinema, among other things their dream-like quality and the fact that Scrooge's evening with the Christmas ghosts can be interpreted as a dream from which the miser awakes, redeemed, on Christmas morning.

- 6 The most famous developments have been formulated by Christian Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier* (sig [\(...\)](#))

9The relationship between dream-images and cinematic images has often been articulated by film theorists.⁶ For Wes Craven, the director of famous horror movies such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) or *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988), 'Cinema lends itself to dreaming. It is in a sense a dream itself. People go into a dark room very much like a bedroom. They see phantasmatic images on the screen that aren't really there. It's part and parcel of dream' (Muir 10). In an unpublished study, Drs. Gordon Globus and Roy Shulman develop the intimate links between dreams and movies, and explain the way the process of identification functions:

The darkness, immobility, relative lack of distractions, and isolation from objective reality-oriented interpersonal events facilitates an ego regression so that ego boundaries are diffused, affective arousal is enhanced, and more primitive defenses are brought into play. It may be conceptualized that with the loss of ego boundaries, the viewer feels as if he is there with the film characters or actually *is* one of the characters, and responds with affect appropriate to the film reality... In responding to film as reality, unconscious mechanisms, especially identification and projective identification, are at work. (Qtd. in Walter Evans 141)

10This psycho-analytical dimension of cinema is present in the *Carol* as Scrooge

receives the ghostly visitors and the 'films' they bring while he is still in bed. In a way, Scrooge's bed stands for a movie theatre in which images are displayed for the fear, delight and fascination of the miser. Some film versions have emphasized this aspect. Bob Statzer notes that in Thomas Edison's *Carol* (1910), Scrooge never leaves his bedchamber, 'the ghostly visions of what has been and what will be appear in the *room like some form of supernatural cinema*' (Statzer 87, my emphasis). The only French film version of the *Carol* directed in 1984 and starring Michel Bouquet highlights this idea as Scrooge not only receives the Spirits in his bed, but uses it as a flying device to travel in the different images (Guida 135).

11 Now, this parallel between the visions displayed by the Spirits and the cinematic medium may seem paradoxical as Dickens was writing before the actual birth of the cinematic medium. But this paradox can be explained by the fact that Dickens experienced in his life the Magic Lantern and its 'fantastic' version, Phantasmagoria, which both constitute cinema's direct ancestors and are at the core of the miser's redemption.

The Magic Lantern

12 The Magic Lantern can be regarded as the natural link between theatre and cinema. It was theatrical in the sense that it was presented to a live audience and that it required the involvement of at least one person or performer to make it happen. But its foundation was highly cinematic. As Guida stresses, 'It is [...] the medium that exerted the most direct influence on the fledging motion picture industry. It is the predecessor of the movies and television and videos that we take so much for granted today' (Guida 50).

The forerunner of our modern slide projector, the Magic Lantern can be traced back to the mid-seventeenth century. Its invention has traditionally been attributed to the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher; recent scholarship, however, credits the Dutchman Christian Huygens with being the first to actually produce a working projector. [...] The Magic Lantern's potential for 'putting on a show' was quickly realized. In the 1660s the Dane Thomas Rasmussen Walgenstein began touring Europe with his Magic Lantern exhibitions, the first in a long tradition of travelling lanternists. (Guida 50)

13 In *The World of Charles Dickens*, Angus Wilson notes that Dickens was exposed to the Magic Lantern at a very early age (Wilson 33). Arguably, this encounter between the writer and the medium had long-lasting consequences as a letter Dickens wrote to an American friend reveals. Dated from December 1842 (just a few months before the writing of the *Carol*) the letter describes how Dickens rented a Magic Lantern for his eldest child's birthday (*The Letters of Charles Dickens* 3: 416). Guida makes the following comment about this occasion:

Whether Dickens hired a professional lanternist or handled the projectionist's chores himself with an amateur model lantern is unclear. However, throughout his life he was what might be termed a 'hands on' entertainer and, given his well-documented skills as an actor and a public reader of his own works, there is every reason to believe that he would have made an excellent magic lanternist had he chosen to do so. (Guida 51)

14The basic idea behind the Magic Lantern is simple: an image that has been fixed on a transparent surface is projected onto a screen by means of a light source and a series of lenses. It bears a striking resemblance to the idea behind the motion picture projector. And as with motion picture technology, there was a constant process of refinement, particularly in the areas of improved optics and sources of illumination, all of which contributed to a bigger and brighter projected image. Furthermore, many visual effects and storytelling techniques that are generally assumed to be the exclusive province of the motion picture, and later television, were actually inherited from the Magic Lantern. For instance,

the familiar pan or panning shot, in which the camera moves horizontally from left to right or right to left, was easily achieved by slowly pulling a long horizontal slide through the projector. And in the nineteenth century, expanding technology enabled the lanternist to achieve sophisticated visual effects, such as the dissolve, in which one image slowly fades in, by using two projectors in tandem. Similarly, the use of two projectors made it possible to cut directly from one slide to the next in much the same way a film director cuts from one shot to another. For the expert lanternist armed with an assortment of conventional and mechanical slides and a triunal projector, the creative possibilities were virtually endless, and all types of Magic Lantern shows were successfully staged throughout the world. (Guida 55)

15The *Carol* is indebted to this proto-cinematic medium both thematically and 'technically'. As Paul Davis has noted, the whole structure of the tale is influenced by the vignette technique exhibited in the medium:

[...] the *Carol* is better known in scenes than as its full length. [...] The iconographic method pictorializes the story, turning it from continuous narrative into a chain of remembered scenes, a series of visual stations along its narrative journey. This visual version of the *Carol* represents Dickens's sense of Christmas. [...], we know Scrooge's life as a set of images: bent over his desk in the cold office, denying coal to his clerk; standing in amazement before his door knocker; kneeling in fright before Marley's ghost. We see him as a child reading in a lonely schoolroom; as a young man preparing the warehouse for Fezziwig's party; as an old man cowering before his gravestone; as a

reformed man leaning out of the window on Christmas morning and asking the boy in the street what day it is. This magic-lantern technique piles all the Christmases in Scrooge's life one on top of the other and allows for rapid transitions in the narrative, creating a visual shorthand to tell the essentials of Scrooge's life. (Davis 66).

16 This Magic Lantern technique can be considered the grandfather of the cinematic montage or editing. In the *Carol*, it provides Dickens with an original and efficient means of dealing with the theme of redemption through a concentration and compression of a series of powerful and emotionally compelling images. As Harry Stone has emphasized, the 'supernatural' editing technique enables the narrator to 'move instantaneously from magic-lantern picture to magic-lantern picture, juxtaposing, contrasting, commenting, and counterpointing [...]. He can evoke the crucial image, limn the archetypal scene, concentrate on the traumatic spot of time, with no need to sketch the valleys in between' (Stone 49).

17 Dickens's editing technique in the *Carol* is duplicated by its Spirits who can be effectively compared with modern editors of films, as they do not only 'project' a series of images (or shots) for Scrooge but also choose the most emotional ones and edit them together to obtain the desired effect on their viewer. Hence, Scrooge is as much redeemed by the way the images are spliced together as by their content.

18 The montage technique exhibited by Dickens has proven particularly attractive to cinema, and it is not surprising to find in the huge bulk of cinematic *Carols* an English televised version produced for Anglia Television in 1970 described by Guida as 'an interesting variation in style comprised of watercolor paintings by John Worsley. There is no motion per se; instead, still images are linked together by cuts, dissolves, zooms and pan' (Guida 197).

[The Phantasmagoria and the Birth of the Cinematic Ghosts](#)

19 Apart from the montage technique, another aspect of the *Carol* is indebted to the Magic Lantern, and more specifically to its most famous relative, the Phantasmagoria. Originally developed by the Belgian Etienne Gaspard Robert, or Robertson, around 1789 and displayed extensively in Paris during the 1790s, shows billed as Phantasmagorias were first exhibited in London in 1802 by a French showman named Paul de Philistal. In his 1832 *Letters on Natural Magic*, the Scottish physicist Sir David Brewster described Philistal's show in this way:

The small theatre of exhibition was lighted only by one hanging lamp, the flame of which was drawn up into one opaque chimney... when

the performance began. In this 'darkness visible' the curtain rose and displayed a cave with skeletons and other terrific figures in relief upon the walls. The flickering light was then drawn up beneath its shroud, and the spectators in total darkness found themselves in the middle of thunder and lightning. A thin transparent screen has been let down after the subsequent appearance were represented. The screen being half-way between the spectators and the cave which was first shown, and being itself invisible, prevented the observers from having any idea of the real distance of the figures, and gave them the entire character of aerial pictures. [...] After the first figure had been exhibited for a short time, it began to grow less and less, as if removed to a great distance, and at last vanished in a small cloud of light. Out of this same cloud the germ of another figure began to appear, and gradually grew larger and larger, and approached the spectators till it attained its perfect development... The spectators were not only surprised but agitated, and many of them were of opinion that they could touch the figures. (qtd. in Petroski 72)

20The appearance and disappearance of the ghosts and their frightening impact on the spectators were obviously remembered by Dickens when he wrote the *Carol*. At the beginning of the story, Marley's Spirit forces Scrooge to watch a series of ghostly apparitions by his window, as if he were attending a Phantasmagoric show: 'The air was filled with phantoms, wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. [...] Whether these creatures faded into mist, or mist enshrouded them, he could not tell. But they and their spirit voices faded together' (Dickens 65). As a 'typical' spectator of Phantasmagoria, Scrooge is frightened by the apparition of the last Ghost: 'As the last stroke ceased to vibrate, he remembered the prediction of Jacob Marley, and lifting up his eyes, beheld a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground, towards him. The Phantom, slowly, gravely, silently approached. When it came near him, Scrooge bent down upon his knee' (Dickens 109).

21In the *Carol*, far from being an artificial display of cinematic illusion, Phantasmagoric techniques and representations are utterly central to the narrative. Karen Petroski argues that it is Scrooge's acceptance of the Phantasmagoria that leads him to the process of redemption:

- 7 Here, Petroski refers to the scenes depicting Scrooge's childhood, in which fictional characters (R [...](#))

By the time Scrooge witnesses this vision [Christmas future], he has learned from the dynamics of Phantasmagoria. His transformation involves learning to suspend judgment about the source and meaning of phantasmagorical visions and to respond to them with both credulity and skepticism. [...] Seeing illusion as illusion but as

nonetheless worthy of an affective response—as he could as a young man—is crucial to Scrooge’s redemption in this narrative.

(Petroski 86)[7](#)

- 8 The December 28, 1895, presentation by Louis and Auguste Lumière in Paris is generally cited as the [\(...\)](#)

22Not surprisingly, the *Carol* began its apparently never-ending cinematic life as Magic Lantern ‘slides’. Unfortunately, most of these pre-cinematic *Carols* are lost. However, the Magic Lantern reached its heyday in the 1890s—a decade that also witnessed the formal introduction of the movies.[8](#)

- 9 On the notion of the aura as being related to the idea of distance, see Christian Zimmer. *Le retour* [\(...\)](#)

23The ‘discovery’ of cinema was convenient for Dickens in general and for the *Carol* in particular as cinema renders Scrooge’s own experience much more efficiently or ‘fully’ than theatre or other media, in that it enables both to capture the dream-like quality of the images in the text, but also the realism of what they show. Indeed, unlike the visions projected by the Magic Lantern which were oftentimes fantastic or allegorical, the visions shown to Scrooge are mostly realistic, they possess a documentary-like quality. Describing the images of Christmas Past, the narrator insists on this realism: ‘Although they had but that moment left the school behind them, they were now in the busy thoroughfares of a city, where shadowy passengers passed and repassed; where shadowy carts and coaches battled for the way, and all the strife and tumult of a real city were’ (Dickens 75). As R. D. Butterworth notes, ‘when the spirits show Scrooge various tableaux, they are not of allegorical figures or scenes, but ones from the real world, miners in their homes, or sailors on board ship’ (Butterworth 68). What fascinates Scrooge is not the modest meal shared by the Cratchit family, or the London streets at Christmas, which he knows well, but their reproduction or ‘duplication’ introducing a gap granting them a form of aura which is at the core of people’s fascination with movies.[9](#) Likewise, at the movies, ‘what attracted the first audience was not watching workers leaving the factory, or a train entering a station, but watching an image of a train, an image of a factory. It was not for the real but for an image of the real that people flocked to the Indian Salon’ (Morin 23). This realism is the province of cinema, which was originally developed by Etienne-Jules Marey, Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers with the scientific aim of reproducing reality as faithfully as possible. In many ways, the visions shown to Scrooge are even (hyper-)realistic, Scrooge finding himself surrounded by shape-shifting images, like a contemporary viewer of state-of-the-art simulators immersed into hyper-realistic 3D images. Hence, it is hardly surprising that Walt Disney produced a [motion-capture](#) 3D version in 2009. In many ways, it ended up a process which started with the Magic Lantern slides, providing the *Carol* with a technique through which it could finally be ‘complete’, this process immersing the viewer in the images the same way Scrooge is

immersed in the Christmas visions.

Modernity and the Embedding Screens

- 10 Self-reference is a central issue in modernist aesthetics and its various post-modern revisions: 'O [\(...\)](#)

24 Given the unavoidable process of *mise en abyme* the cinematic medium encounters when it adapts the *Carol*, the *Carol* has become a privileged site for modernist issues about the representation of the media itself.¹⁰ Indeed, most of the modern *Carols* are set in the age of video and television. In a 1994 Christmas episode of the animated series *Animaniacs*, the Scrooge surrogate is Thaddeus Plotz, head of the Warner Brothers studio, and he is brought to his senses by three familiar Spirits played by Yallo, Wakko, and Dot. As the Ghost of Christmas Past, Yakko sets up a projector and screen and shows Plotz his past in the form of home movies, a meta-discursive dimension which reveals (in the chemical sense) the cinematic dimension at the core of the story. The same year, the 'Spirit of Yom Kippur Past' uses VCR and television to show Scrooge some of his past transgressions in the episode 'Shofar, So Good' of the series *Northern Exposure* (Guida 224).

25 This meta-filmic dimension is even more explicit in *Ebbie* (George Kaczender, 1995, with Susan Lucci in the role of a female Scrooge). In this feminist version of the *Carol*, Jacob Marley first appears on Ebbie's TV screen. She changes channels to avoid seeing the Ghost. But he reappears on another channel as a character in an old *film noir*, implicitly confirming that he belongs to the world of cinema. Holding a remote control, he points it towards Ebbie, and pushes the button, thus projecting her inside the television frame.

26 This projection of Scrooge and of the *Carol* in the world of television screens is also present in a televised version of the tale produced in Great Britain in 2000. In this adaptation starring Ross Kemp as Scrooge, the first Spirit (Warren Mitchell) appears on Scrooge's TV screen and cracks it with his fists to escape from it. The film also multiplies the framing of Scrooge within televised screens. For instance, while Scrooge is having a drink in a pub, the camera moves forward to capture his face in a close-up. Suddenly, his face is framed by a new screen. After the camera moves backward in a quick tracking shot, Scrooge finds himself trapped within a televised screen watched by the ghost. At the end of the film, Scrooge does not buy the traditional turkey for the Cratchit family but a bright new VCR, implicitly admitting his submission to and incorporation into the televised medium. This is visible in the gradual replacing of the original diegetic referents by references to the world of television and cinema in some *Carol* adaptations. Thus, in *Rich Little's Christmas Carol* (Canada, 1978). Rich Little appears as film celebrities portraying the familiar Dickens characters: W. C. Fields (Ebenezer Scrooge), Johnny Carson (Nephew Fred), Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (Charity Solicitors),

Humphrey Bogart (Ghost of Christmas Past), Groucho Marx (Fezziwig), Peter Sellers as Inspector Clouseau (Ghost of Christmas Future). John Wayne and George Burns appear as the two businessmen discussing Scrooge's death during a future Christmas, with additional appearances by Cary Grant and Dean Martin.

27In *Scrooged*, Bill Murray plays Frank Cross, an omnipotent television network executive producing his own version of *A Christmas Carol*. Working in an office filled with TV screens and camera monitors where he watches over his employees, Cross is a modern Dr Mabuse whose power does not stem from the accumulation of capital as much as from the mastering of the omnipotent gaze. Cross's problems arise from his subjection to television at a tender age. Indeed, the Spirit of Christmas Past reveals that Cross has compensated for an imperfect upbringing by turning to television, and that his childhood has been entirely displaced by scenes from *The Little House on the Prairie* and other sitcoms. As Caroline McCracken Flesher has stressed, '[Cross] cannot distinguish famous moments in television from genuine personal memories [...] Cross has been constructed as the perfect viewing subject'. (McCracken Flesher 111). In *Scrooged*, the *Carol* provides a frame in which the mythology of television can be explored and celebrated.

28*The Muppet Christmas Carol* is another striking example of the modern *Carol*. At the beginning of the film 'Gonzo the rat' exclaims: 'Hello, I'm Gonzo, mmmhh, I mean Charles Dickens!' Here, the pleasure of watching the film clearly derives from the recognition of the Muppet characters in the guise of the *Carol's* characters.

Conclusion

29For reasons developed here, I contend that *A Christmas Carol*—a narrative about the projection of images, the process of spectatorship and the psychological effect of images on the viewer—does not acquire its full potential when it is read or heard, but when it is turned to film and watched. In many ways, one could argue that it was written to be adapted into film. Because of the cinematic dimension of Scrooge's conversion process, watching a film adaptation of the *Carol* seems to be the best way to identify with Scrooge and to participate plainly in his own cinematic experience. As viewers watching images from our seat in a movie theatre or on a TV screen, we all become potential Scrooges, watching him watching pictures.

- 11 Jean-Louis LEUTRAT, *Vie des fantômes: Le fantastique au cinéma*, Cahiers du cinéma, Paris, 1995.

30Using a Darwinian framework (and playing on the meaning of the word "adaptation"), Sarah Cardwell has argued that some stories looked for some cultural sites/bodies in which to grow and expand, the way some species survive

and evolve by adapting to new environments. In cinema, the *Carol* seems to have found a 'natural' place in which to bloom. But this attraction could be said to function both ways. In *Vie des fantômes: Le fantastique au cinéma*, Jean Louis Leutrat contends that cinema is attracted to certain tales that enable it to explore its potentiality and powers (hence its affinity with fantastic fiction and ghost stories).¹¹ In the case of the *Carol*, this argument is legitimate as we have seen that the more cinema and television adapted the tale, the more the adaptations were about the film/TV medium itself and the mythology of cinema. Dickens's Christmas tale provides a congenial milieu for cinema to recapitulate its history (Magic Lantern, Phantasmagoria, realism...) and reaffirm its powers, which may explain the enduring fascination the *Carol* holds for cinema and film viewers.

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Notes

1 I base this claim on Michael Patrick Hearn, *The Annotated Christmas Carol*, New York: Avon Books, 1977; Paul Davis, *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1990; Paul Sammon, *A Christmas Carol Trivia Book, Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Every Version of the Dickens Classic*, Citadel Press, 2001; Fred Guida, *A Christmas Carol and Its Adaptations: A Critical Examination of Dickens's Story and Its Productions on Screen and Television*, Jefferson: McFarland, 2006; and Bob Statzer, 'Christmas Spirits: A Cheerful Checklist of Onscreen Scrooges', *Scary Monsters Magazine* 48 (2003): 83–106.

2 One of the funniest and most memorable ones is *Blackadder's Christmas Carol* (BBC, December 1988). Ebenezer Blackadder (Rowan Atkinson), the Victorian proprietor of a 'moustache shop', is the nicest man in England. As a result, people take advantage of his kindness. One Christmas Eve, Blackadder's destiny changes when the Spirit of Christmas (Robbie Coltrane) visits him to congratulate him on his ways and shows him visions of his future if he goes on living this way. But the Spirits' plans fall through as Blackadder identifies with the 'wrong' people and ends up convinced that he should stop being nice and that 'Bad guys have all the fun'. He wakes up a different man: bitter, vengeful, greedy, and insulting to everyone he meets.

3 An excerpt can be found in Leo Braudy, Marshall Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*, Sixth Edition, Oxford University Press, 2004.

4 When Griffith proposed to his employers the novelty of a parallel 'cut-back' for his first version of *Enoch Arden* (*After Many Years*, 1908), this is the discussion that took place: 'When Mr Griffith suggested a scene showing Annie Lee waiting for her husband's return to be followed by a scene of Enoch cast away on a desert island, it was altogether too distracting. "How can you tell a story jumping about like that? The people won't know what it's about." "Well," said Mr Griffith, "doesn't Dickens write that way?"' (D. W. Griffith, *When the Movies Were Young*. New York, Dutton, 1925) 66.

5 The Masque was a theatrical performance combining text, elaborate costumes, music, dance, and spectacular stage effects, some of them dependent on rapid changes of scene. Masques were derived in part from medieval morality plays, in part from the elaborate parades and processions of Renaissance courts on such great state occasions as royal progressions or weddings. In royal processions and at the court, allegorical figures representing virtues, vices, abstract concepts such as sovereignty or virginity, or perhaps England or Scotland, appeared. At court Masques these figures appeared on stage, dressed in extravagant costumes and framed in elaborate settings. The Masque's overt purport was to celebrate and encourage virtue (See Enid Welsford, *The Court Masque*, New York: Russel and Russel, 1962).

6 The most famous developments have been formulated by Christian Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier* (significant passages can be found in Leo Braudy, Marshall

Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*, Sixth Edition, OUP, 2004), and by Edgar Morin in *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire*, Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1956.

[7](#) Here, Petroski refers to the scenes depicting Scrooge's childhood, in which fictional characters (Robinson Crusoe, Ali Baba, etc.) come to life as the young boy is reading fairy tales and romances. This scene is central as it shows that Scrooge had the ability to literally 'picture' images when he was a child. For a theoretical development on that scene, see my article « A Night at the Pictures : A *Christmas Carol* ou la séduction du simulacre » in *Cahiers Victoriens et édouardiens* 64 (oct. 2006): 107–25.

[8](#) The December 28, 1895, presentation by Louis and Auguste Lumière in Paris is generally cited as the 'official' premiere.

[9](#) On the notion of the aura as being related to the idea of distance, see Christian Zimmer. *Le retour de la fiction*. Paris: Editions du CERFA, 1984, p. 63.

[10](#) Self-reference is a central issue in modernist aesthetics and its various post-modern revisions: 'On the side of modernism, one thinks of Clement Greenberg's claim that modern art aims to explore and present the essential nature of its own medium or Michael Fried's characterization of the self-referential "absorption" and anti-theatricality of modern painting' (Mitchell 35).

[11](#) Jean-Louis LEUTRAT, *Vie des fantômes: Le fantastique au cinéma*, Cahiers du cinéma, Paris, 1995.

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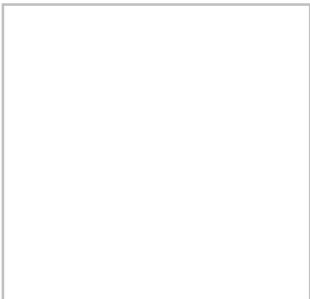


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