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Normative Ideology, Transgressive Aesthetics: Depicting and Exploring the Urban Underworld in *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Twist* (2003) and *Boy Called Twist* (2004)

*Idéologie normative, esthétique transgressive : description et exploration des bas-fonds urbains dans *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Twist* (2003) et *Boy Called Twist* (2004)*

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- 1 The sheer number and variety of adaptations of Dickens's works testify to the incredibly multifaceted quality of his texts. The rich and complex aesthetics of Dickens's London, for example, has been granted a long and rich afterlife. In particular, the urban underworld of *Oliver Twist* has experienced some of the most dramatic changes at the hands of adapters: it was filmed as a repulsively licentious universe by Frank Lloyd in 1922; it became both frightening and fascinating as seen through the eyes of David Lean in 1948; its subversive potential was assimilated into an aesthetic of picturesque in the 1968 musical *Oliver!*, and so on. Later adaptations continued to either emphasise or tone down the transgressive quality of Dickens's criminal world and both these opposing choices can be justified by looking at the original text. Whether it be the result of a 'triumph of unconscious forces' (Kincaid 63) or the consequence of 'a coherent strategy of representation' (Kucich 64–65), the depiction of urban margins in *Oliver Twist* is based on a tight entanglement of norms and transgressions: the novel stages 'a struggle, which is never fully resolved, between the Dickens... committed to writing the narrative of bourgeois ascendancy and the Dickens whose fictional imagination runs loose and is recruited for the dissident underworld' (Newey 12). These two facets of the text are inextricably intertwined, in a way that is reminiscent of the proximity between the two

Latin verbs *'educare'* and *'educere'*. While the first of these words refers to a psychological process of education and training, the second points to a physical experience of leading forth or drawing out and away. *Oliver Twist* reveals both an effort to educate its readers to the evils of urban criminality and a tendency to depart from that ideology, to explore the fascinating bystreets of the slums and the alternative and sometimes seductive ontologies which they suggest.

- 2 In his preface to the third edition of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens highlights the educational quality of the novel: the author expresses his conviction that 'a lesson of the purest good may be drawn from the vilest evil' (Dickens 3) and trumpets his intention to 'paint [criminals] in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid poverty of their lives; to show them as they really are, for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life' (Dickens 4)—and thus to educate his readers to the misery of the urban underworld. This streak of *'educare'* heralded in the preface is echoed throughout the body of the text. Descriptions of criminal characters often betray the 'undisguised repulsion' (Orwell 476) felt by their author. Sikes is intolerably coarse and rude and, down to his legs which 'look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them' (Dickens 90), he is clearly portrayed as an out-and-out villain. Fagin is depicted as devilish and cunning; he resembles a 'loathsome reptile' (Dickens 132) looking 'less like a man than like some hideous phantom' (Dickens 311), inspiring repulsion as well as fear. By merging transgression with obnoxious characteristics such as brutality and deceitfulness, these stereotypical criminals serve 'a normative scenario of crime and punishment' (D. A. Miller 3–4). This didactic scenario is supported by the narrator, who consistently endeavours to distinguish himself from the underworld and its residents. To this end, the narrative voice draws attention to the utter vileness and freakishness of criminals; it thus enhances the 'closed-circuit character of delinquency' and 'holds the line of a *cordon sanitaire*' (D. A. Miller 5), making absolutely clear the boundary that separates the centre from the margins. Another instance of *'educare'* in *Oliver Twist* lies with the author's stated intention to make intelligible all the details of a mysterious and dark underworld, and hence to follow the 'detective impulse of criminal science' (Wolff 230). By explaining that 'Sikes is a thief, and Fagin a receiver of stolen goods; that the boys are pickpockets, and the girl is a prostitute' (Dickens 3), the author of the preface expresses his wish 'to investigate, discover, and identify, to classify the criminal according to the crime' (Wolff 230).
- 3 More often than not, however, the text itself strays from the normative path set in the preface and 'this side of Dickens which yearns to see people regimented, uniform in their behaviour, obeying rules' (Carey 32) is counterbalanced—sometimes eclipsed—by another facet of his imaginative self: that which is deeply fascinated by and 'invested in his violent and vicious characters' (Carey 17). In *Oliver Twist*, the impulse towards *'educare'* is countered by a tendency towards *'educere'*, as the text leads its readers into the absorbing depths of the underworld. To begin with, criminal figures are not always merely repulsive: the tragic endings that befall the Artful Dodger at his trial, Sikes after the murder of Nancy, and Fagin in his cell all induce a change in their characterisation, ultimately humanising the novel's three main criminals. Even before this final shift, the London underworld often proves fascinating in all its subversion and repulsiveness. Despite the ideological tone of Dickens's preface, the 'foul and frowsy dens where vice is closely packed' (Dickens 5) turn out to be the only 'isolated pocket of vitality and spontaneity' in the novel (Kincaid 70). Thus, Fagin's tricks may be reread as skilful

manipulations of fact and fiction and as crafty theatrical performances (see John 2001, 129–40); the Dodger’s slang certainly marks him as an unmistakable member of the criminal class, but it also possesses a vivid aesthetic quality that renders it almost poetic. Such ambivalence in the characterisation of criminals redefines the ‘normative scenario’ (D. A. Miller 3) that these figures supposedly enact. In addition, the normative impulse to understand, explain and classify is challenged in the text through a kind of aesthetics of confusion and disorientation. The description of Oliver’s first venture into the underworld is an interesting mixture of classification and confusion:

[Oliver and the Dodger] crossed from the Angel into St. John’s-road; struck down the small street which terminates at Sadler’s Wells Theatre; through Exmouth-street and Coppice-row; down the little court by the side of the workhouse; across the classic ground which once bore the name of Hockley-in-the-Hole; thence into Little Saffron-Hill; and so into Saffron-hill the Great. (Dickens 64)

- 4 This meticulous description relies on concrete geographical details that make the itinerary intelligible and retraceable. But the sheer accumulation of these details, along with their uneven notoriety and relevance, transforms this quasi-scientific typology into a bewildering textual proliferation: while these locations seem familiar to Dickens and his narrator, they may be unknown to the reader and even more so to Oliver, for whom ‘the place names are simply superficial facts’ (J. H. Miller 57). As in Michel De Certeau’s *Practices of Everyday Life*, street names ‘carve out pockets of hidden and familiar meaning’ in spaces ‘brutally lit by an alien reason’ (De Certeau 104). Later in the novel, this tension between cold categorisation and enigmatic exploration resurfaces in Smithfield Market, where a ‘tumult of discordant sounds’ makes for ‘a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confounded the senses’ (Dickens 146–47), and in the Three Cripples, whose customers form ‘an assemblage of heads, as confused as the noises that greeted the ear’ (Dickens 173).
- 5 This partly demonstrates how the entanglement of norm and transgression crucially shapes the aesthetics of *Oliver Twist*. Critics and adapters of the novel often explore one or the other of these facets, and they constantly enrich our understanding of the text’s fundamental ambivalence. Generally speaking, the idea of subversion ‘coincides with recent readings’ of Dickens’s novels (Vanfasse 243) and is at the core of many recent adaptations. I now propose to focus on two case studies, in order to draw out how the fundamental ambivalence of *Oliver Twist* may be adapted, and to assess the relevance, the purpose, and the effect of Dickens’s text today. *Twist* (2003) and *Boy Called Twist* (2004) respond to the surface ideology of *Oliver Twist* by offering both a bleak vision and a clear definition of the underworld. But on the other hand, these films also reject a normative representation of criminals and fully appropriate the potential of their source text for transgression, which constantly threatens to lead astray.
- 6 *Twist* (2003) is a ‘queer’ adaptation of Dickens’s novel, in both senses of the word: in terms of gender ‘queering’ and also more generally of a transgressive turning or bending away from norms. Its action takes place in Toronto, in the underworld of male prostitution; the film thus brings to light ‘the possibility that the boys may be sold for sex in the narrative interstices between the serial chapters’ of *Oliver Twist* (Wolff 228). In a way, this adaptation extends Dickens’s typology of criminals, by including what he would have had to leave out for the sake of decency and of the ‘taste’ invoked in the preface (Dickens 6). *Twist* makes unequivocal its definition of the underworld by erasing most of the vividness underlying *Oliver Twist*’s criminals: the Dodger’s colourful slang is not represented in this adaptation, where words are few and far between; Fagin is no longer a fascinating

performer; Charley Bates never laughs and hardly ever smiles. The film places emphasis on the ‘unattractive and repulsive truth’ mentioned in the preface (Dickens 6), sparing none of the details of this grim reality and excluding all possibility of redemption. In this new environment, Oliver can simply no longer embody the ‘principle of Good, surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last’ (Dickens 3). To convey this sense of fatality and despair, director Jacob Tierney often employs still shots that are fraught with meaning. A shot of Oliver and Dodge sitting side by side in a children’s playground provides a good example of this technique (figure 1).

Illustration 1 – Oliver and Dodge, from Tierney’s *Twist*



COURTESY OF STRAND RELEASING AND JACOB TIERNEY

- 7 Here, a small bridge linking two slides in the background points to the connection that is being established between the two boys. A corkscrew, twisted slide behind Oliver acts as a reminder of the boy’s original surname, otherwise unmentioned in the film. But it also hints that Oliver is to be ‘twisted’, that is to say perverted by his environment. Hence, the film makes explicit the novel’s contradiction between the hero’s role as a ‘principle of good’ and his ominous name ‘Twist’. The playground setting of this scene is marked by a sharp contrast between the innocent users for whom it was designed and the tragic overtones which it carries in this particular context: the scene suggests that Oliver and Dodge have forever lost their childhood in the wretched reality of the underworld. Once Oliver has crossed the threshold into the criminal world he cannot hope to go back, as the film clearly defines ‘an impassable distance between outcast queer life and more inhabitable domestic spaces’ (Furneauux 246). By the end of the film, Oliver has been corrupted to the point of literally *becoming* Dodge. This is implied by a compelling parallel between the film’s first sequence, in which Dodge is sitting on the bed of a man with whom he clearly just had sex, and the last sequence, which shows Oliver in the same position and with the same client. *Twist* echoes *Oliver Twist*’s impulse towards ‘*educare*’: it dramatizes the novel’s endeavour to draw a precise and forbidding portrait of urban margins, and to demonstrate how much suffering this world has in store for its denizens.
- 8 At the same time, however, the adaptation also entwines this didactic definition of marginality with a kind of aesthetics of transgression. One of the ways in which *Twist*

recreates the ambivalence of its source text is by representing Fagin, played here by Gary Farmer, as a teacher figure. In Dickens's novel, Fagin scolds the boys when they come home empty-handed: he 'expatiate[s] with great vehemence on the misery of idle life and lazy habits' and sends them 'supperless to bed', so as to 'enforce upon them the necessity of an active life' (Dickens 71). *Twist* makes a very strong case for this depiction of Fagin as a deviant teacher. The door leading into his office bears the mention of 'headmaster', and he is often seen admonishing the boys, for example with 'You smoke too much' or 'Watch your tone of voice'. Fagin appears as a teacher, and even as a father figure in these examples. In fact, the film goes as far as to suggest that Fagin could be seen as a spiritual guide, for such was the role played by Gary Farmer in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* a few years earlier. The actor playing Fagin thus brings an added dimension to the character, highlighting the educational quality entangled with his deviance. This emphasis on Fagin's quality as a teacher figure may be read, I think, as a comment upon the endeavour to educate the audience. The 'receiver of stolen goods' (Dickens 3) is not granted theatrical powers, but he becomes a plausible figure of authority; the character leading the boys out of the norm is also the character educating the boys; 'educare' merges with 'educere'; transgression becomes an alternative norm.

- 9 But *Twist's* Fagin has yet another subversive facet: his role as a procurer in the film makes us look back to a fundamental ambivalence in Dickens's text, brilliantly analysed by Larry Wolff in an article entitled 'Gender and Juvenile Criminality in Early Victorian England from *Oliver Twist* to London Labour'. In his study, Wolff challenges the 'gendering of prostitution' which 'has long governed the reading of [the novel's] cryptic criminal underworld' (Wolff 228). *Oliver Twist* contains an 'indeterminacy' as to the boys' real criminal activity, but it also contains the denial of that indeterminacy, in obedience to the 'ideological matrix of early Victorian culture' (Wolff 228). *Twist* shatters this taboo and plays with the ambivalence of its source text. By making the boys into prostitutes, the film does extend Dickens's typology of criminals but it also undermines the effort to establish specific distinct categories of criminals: *Twist* collapses the distinction drawn in Dickens's preface between Nancy and the boys, respectively defined as 'a prostitute' and 'pickpockets' (Dickens 3). The film's emphasis on overlapping categories reaches a climax when, sitting in the aforementioned playground, Dodge explains his 'trade' to Oliver:

'We hustle'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean... Look, we're hustlers. You know, like, loose women.'

'You mean hookers, right?'

- 10 The use of the words 'hustler' and 'hooker', both meaning 'thief' as well as 'prostitute', stresses the ambivalence in the activity conducted by Dickens's criminals. Besides, the phrase 'loose women', uttered by Dodge in an ironic tone, points to the falsity of *Oliver Twist's* 'gendering of prostitution'. This challenge to the novel's normative ideology does not only affect criminal figures. Indeed, 'the possibility of child prostitution in the novel threatens [the] clear distinction' between centre and margins (Wolff 241). In the late 1830s, a thieving boy would have been transported from England, whereas a young male prostitute would have been innocent of sodomy, thus leaving someone else as the guilty party: as a result, 'the criminal world of the novel would cease to be legally enclosed, and would reach out to implicate its respectable characters, perhaps even its respectable readers' (Wolff 246). This is made immediately tangible in *Twist* through the films' Brownlow figure, 'the Senator', who is one of the boys' regular customers. Again, the adaptation brings out a latent feature of *Oliver Twist*, in which 'Brownlow's ardency to

possess the boy has unmistakable affinities with those less benevolent “guardians” who [like Fagin] are also specifically attracted to the boy’s prepossessing physical appearance’ (Furieux 45). The film therefore suggests that ‘the energy which has been dedicated to reading Fagin as a pederast in both literary criticism and earlier filmic reworkings could be as usefully directed to Brownlow’s interest in Oliver’ (Furieux 48). Like Larry Wolff or Holy Furieux, *Twist* thus prompts us to redefine the terms in which we read *Oliver Twist*. In a striking instance of ‘*educere*’, the adaptation ‘queers’ our relation to Dickens’s text,¹ in so far as it strays from the novel’s surface ideology: *Twist* brings out the interplay of norm and subversion underlying Dickens’s text, thus taking us ‘away from an abject reliance on the mutually reinforcing matrix of supposed normativity and transgression’ (Furieux 10).

- 11 *Boy Called Twist* (2004) also adapts *Oliver Twist*’s tension between ideology and aesthetics to a different medium and to a new context. The big city is now Cape Town, where Dickens’s London finds an apposite afterlife. First, the AIDS pandemic has made the question of young orphans as poignant as it was in the mid-nineteenth century. Besides, the remaining—if not official—racial segregation continues to divide the city, so that a wide gap separates the social and cultural centre from its margins. In the film, the distinction between centre and margins is made apparent through a series of very didactic cinematic strategies. As in David Lean’s 1948 *Oliver Twist*, an unmistakable visual opposition is established between these two urban spaces: the slums are most often seen by night and Fagin’s den is only candle-lit, whereas the house and neighbourhood of Mr Bassedien—*Boy Called Twist*’s Brownlow figure—are conspicuously clean, well-lighted places, inhabited by people wearing immaculate white clothes. Camera angles and movements also differ in these respective locations: in the equivalent of Pentonville, high angle shots and extreme long shots of the city, along with slow pans, render everything highly visible, with no hidden nooks and crannies. In the underworld, on the other hand, visibility is much reduced: close ups, rapid camera movements and a fast-paced editing are employed to convey an impression of confusion, while at other times, slow motion and handheld shots convey the boys’ viewpoint, whose minds are numbed by drugs and alcohol. The music also contributes to this spatial antagonism: while the underworld is associated with hip-hop and R’n’B, the pious Muslim world of Mr Bassedien is aurally defined by jazz and occasionally by religious music. This aural opposition is made crystal-clear in a sequence following the kidnapping of Twist by Nancy and Sikes: the boy is seen walking down a street, against a soundtrack of heavy R’n’B music; the tracking shot suddenly stops, as Twist catches a glimpse of Mr Bassedien’s neighbourhood in the distance, and the soundtrack simultaneously changes to a muezzin’s call; the R’n’B and tracking shot resume when Charley Bates grabs Twist’s shoulder and forces him to keep on walking. This passage suggests that by being taken away into the margins, Twist is deprived of the purity and transcendence that characterise the centre. *Boy Called Twist* thus strongly renders the existence of a gap between centre and margins.
- 12 But this opposition is almost too obvious, too didactic, to the point where it can make viewers suspicious. Hence, the repeated insistence upon ‘*educare*’ may lead to another reading of the film. To begin with, several diegetic and aesthetic elements suggest that there could be an ironic twist to this didactic normative surface. The introductory shot of Fagin places the character alongside a newspaper’s front page saying ‘Dagga makes you mal’, Afrikaner for ‘Cannabis makes you insane’. Seeing as Fagin’s boys were shown sniffing glue and smoking joints a few minutes earlier, this shot underlines the ironic self-

consciousness of the underworld. Just as Dickens's Fagin links his own image to 'the myth of Romantic criminality' (John 2001, 131) by giving Oliver the Newgate Calendar (Dickens 140), the Fagin from *Boy Called Twist* reflects upon his own image by manipulating it in relation to the media.² Such moments of self-reflexivity imply that criminals are 'aware of performing symbolic inversions' (Newey 92), thus creating a flaw in the text/film's normative discourse. What is more, the visual contrast—filmed by a Black director—between a dark underworld and a white centre may well be seen as ironic if we recall the bleak situation of segregation still lurking in Cape Town. Similarly, the opposition between high and low visibility may be given a more subversive interpretation if we look at it from a slightly different angle: a high vantage point certainly offers clear visibility and the possibility to know and to understand, but to be at ground level makes for a truer, more meaningful experience of the city. This is precisely what De Certeau asserts, in *The Invention of Everyday Life*:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Centre is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; . . . The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below', below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city: they are walkers, *Wandersmänner* whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. (De Certeau 92-93)

- 13 Not to see and not to understand creates the possibility of an experience. Just like the textual proliferation permeating Dickens's geographical descriptions, the film's low visibility and aesthetics of confusion subvert the endeavour to define, categorise and orientate. The didactic drive towards 'educare' is turned against itself and into an immersive experience of 'educere'.
- 14 It is possible to detect yet another form of subversion in *Boy Called Twist*, by examining the film's self-reflexivity as an adaptation of Dickens's novel. At the beginning of the film, the workhouse matron is seen choosing a name for the hero by looking at the books sitting on her shelf: the previous newcomer was named after *Robinson Crusoe*, and the next book on the shelf happens to be *Oliver Twist*. Thus, the boy is arbitrarily called 'Twist'—and not 'Oliver' because of 'the other Oli'. This scene may be read as a metafilmic comment on the process of adaptation: just as Tierney's *Twist* 'queers' our reading of Dickens's novel, *Boy Called Twist* 'twists' its relation to its source text—and to the canon at large—by presenting it as ancillary to its own down-to-earth purposes. The film did indeed use Dickens's text for political motifs: *Boy Called Twist* is an independent production, funded by over one thousand South-African associate producers, who all contributed to keeping the project alive. While 'second-tier media-producing countries' usually need 'collaboration with or . . . acquiescence to US and UK cultural gatekeepers' in order to 'gain exposure to global English-language audiences for their content' (Murray 21), Tim Greene refused '[to go] for big bucks from production houses [and] sold shares in the film to ordinary South Africans' (Barker). As a result the national audience found it 'hard not to feel a swelling of pride at the sight of a South African city immortalised and interpreted through [a South African] camera, rather than a foreign one' (Barker). *Oliver Twist* as a canonical British text is used against itself: the cultural norm is transgressed through the process of adaptation; the centre is made to serve the needs of the margins.

- 15 In conclusion, the entanglement of ‘educare’ and ‘educere’ in *Oliver Twist* has crucial aesthetic implications: Dickens’s exploration of a fascinating underworld along with the resulting textual immersion and disorientating experience open worlds of possibilities for film-makers. But the interplay of norm and transgression in the novel also has a significant cultural and even political potential. Since it resists its own ideology, the text may in turn be used as an instrument of resistance. Ever since the epoch of their production, Dickens’s novels have been often commodified, that is to say made into ‘thing [s] produced for use or sale’³ and designed to satisfy the wants of the greatest number. The ‘heritagization’ (John 2011, 240) and ‘Disneyfication’ (John 2011, 275) of Dickens’s work, for instance, exemplify the ‘normalisation’ of his text. But in many other ways, his writing also continues to resist this trend; the strong undercurrent of transgression running through his texts continues to provide a space for resistance, both ‘to time [and] to hegemonic or monolithic discourse’ (Jumeau and Thornton 4)—for such is the essence of Dickensian persistence. *Oliver Twist* has been seized upon by many adapters who, ‘read [ing] against the grain of [its] surface orthodoxy’ (Newey 10), ‘queer’ or ‘twist’ our relation to this canonical text, and revive its aesthetic, cultural and political potential for subversion.

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NOTES

1. This analysis was initially conceived in a March 2013 seminar, during a discussion with Pr. Catherine Bernard and Edouard Marsoin, whom I take this opportunity to thank.
2. Many thanks to Pr. Laurent Bury, who first suggested the idea of drawing this parallel.
3. OED definition for 'commodity'.

ABSTRACTS

In his preface to *Oliver Twist*, Dickens insists that his depiction of the London underworld is deprived of 'allurements and fascinations', and states his didactic ambition to offer a realistic description of this grim universe. Yet, in many ways, the text itself is led astray from this normative path, and the aesthetics of *Oliver Twist's* criminal world thwarts the ideology expressed in the preface. After having examined how Dickens's novel is fundamentally structured by an interplay of norms and transgressions, I propose to look at two recent adaptations which fully appropriate the ambivalence of their source text. *Twist* and *Boy Called Twist* both respond to the didactic ideology of *Oliver Twist* and make the most of the novel's subversive potential. In the end, these two films deploy many latent aspects of the text, thus redefining the terms in which we

read *Oliver Twist*. By breaking away from traditional readings of the novel, they transgress our relation to this canonical text, which continues to resist attempts at normalisation and normative interpretations. This paper takes into account not only the aesthetics of these adaptations but also their contexts of production, in which *Oliver Twist*'s potential for resistance takes on new meanings and new purposes.

Dans sa préface à *Oliver Twist*, Dickens soutient ne prêter aucun pouvoir de fascination aux bas-fonds londoniens et affirme son ambition didactique de faire de cet univers sinistre une description réaliste. Pourtant, par bien des aspects, le texte du roman s'éloigne de cette voie normative, et la représentation des bas-fonds criminels dans *Oliver Twist* contredit l'idéologie formulée dans la préface. Après avoir analysé l'entrelacement de normes et de transgressions qui structure le roman, cet article se penchera sur deux adaptations récentes, qui s'approprient pleinement l'ambivalence de leur texte source. *Twist* et *Boy Called Twist* sont deux films qui se saisissent de l'idéologie didactique d'*Oliver Twist*, tout en exploitant le potentiel subversif du roman. Il apparaît finalement que ces deux adaptations déploient de nombreux éléments sous-tendant le texte source, contribuant ainsi à redéfinir la façon dont nous lisons *Oliver Twist*. En rompant avec certaines lectures traditionnelles du roman, *Twist* et *Boy Called Twist* transgressent notre rapport à ce texte canonique, qui continue de résister aux efforts de normalisation et aux interprétations normatives. Cet article prend en compte non seulement l'esthétique de ces adaptations mais aussi leur contexte de production, dans lequel le potentiel transgressif d'*Oliver Twist* s'investit d'une portée nouvelle.

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Mots-clés: *Oliver Twist*, Dickens (Charles), adaptation, persistance, canon, Dickensien, normes, transgressions, queer, marges urbaines

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