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Resistance and Persistence: *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*, Two Film Versions of G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*

The Chocolate Soldier, a musical based on G. B. Shaw's anti-militaristic play *Arms and the Man* which was made without the author's permission, "annoyed Shaw tremendously."¹ The realisation that others could do as they pleased with his own plays was the reason why Shaw absolutely refused to have one of his most popular plays, *Pygmalion* (1914), ever turned into a musical, whether for the stage or the screen. As he argued, for him the play was good enough "with its own verbal music."² He agreed, though, to the making of, among other films based on his plays, *Pygmalion* (1938), the remarkable adaptation produced by Gabriel Pascal and directed by Anthony Asquith. Today few people are aware of the existence of Asquith's adaptation and, ironically, Shaw's play is mostly known as the source of one of the most popular stage musicals of Broadway's golden 1950s—*My Fair Lady*—and its sumptuous screen adaptation of 1964 by George Cukor. Shaw, who died in 1950, did not live to witness this metamorphosis but if he had, he would have been

doubtless mortified by the fact that his trusted producer, Gabriel Pascal, was the man who planted the seeds from which the stage musical and Cukor's film would grow.

Two main issues are addressed here through the account of how Shaw's *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* are linked: first, the process by which the will of authors to protect their work is contradicted by others, and, second, the pragmatics of the screen adaptation, aspects which are in fact closely linked. As is well known, once the rights over a literary text have been secured by a producer or a studio, the author of the original source relinquishes his or her hold on the fate of the literary text on the screen. Money is expected to soothe any anxieties regarding authorship and most authors are happy enough to cash the cheque and let others work on the actual screenplay. In contrast, whenever the author is directly involved in the writing of the adaptation, caring more for faithfulness to the literary original than for financial reward, difficulties are certain to arise. In any case, once s/he is dead, as *Pygmalion's* case suggests, adapters feel licensed to work with fewer restraints on the original source.

In the transition from Shaw's *Pygmalion* to Cukor's *My Fair Lady*, Gabriel Pascal's persistence went well beyond G. B. Shaw's resistance, if only because Pascal survived Shaw. Of course, nobody—save possibly Shaw—would regret the existence of a film such as *My Fair Lady*, but the question is that Pascal's persistence leads inevitably to a paradoxical celebration of the betrayal of the original author's will. Screen adaptations in general should perhaps be best approached as the only artistic space that allows for a creative breakdown of the otherwise sacred notion of literary authorship. Nobody can deny Shaw the authorship of the play *Pygmalion*, but nobody can deny, either, the fact that if Pascal had respected his will, Broadway and Hollywood would have missed the chance to offer the world *My Fair Lady*.

Pygmalion

Curiously enough, the first film adapting *Pygmalion* was a German production directed by Erich Engel in 1935; the second was Dutch (1937, directed by Ludwig Berger). The persistent Gabriel Pascal—an Hungarian émigré attached to the circle of his fellow countryman, the influential producer Alexander Korda—convinced an initially resistant Shaw to let him film *Pygmalion*, which would be his third British film, practically twenty-five years after its opening in a British theatre. Shaw, who was quite dissatisfied with the British screen versions of his plays *How he Lied to her Husband* (1931) and *Arms and the Man* (1932) in which he had been closely involved, apparently allowed Pascal to make this first English film version of *Pygmalion* because the sly Hungarian assured Shaw that his text would be respected and he would retain full control of the film's ending, a point that deeply concerned the dramatist. Shaw even accepted Pascal's offer to write himself the screenplay, "having loathed the sentimental German and Dutch film adaptations."³ The credits for this screenplay went finally, however, to a team of four writers including Shaw himself: Cecil Lewis—author of the screenplays for *How he Lied to her Husband* and *Arms and the Man*—W. P. Lipscomb and Ian Dalrymple; the two latter seem to have been employed to revise the final version of the script, a quite habitual practice, without actually collaborating with Shaw. Whatever were their exact contributions, the four of them were awarded an Oscar for best screenplay adapted from other materials. Shaw rejected his, feeling that the award was an insult to the author of the original play.⁴

Pygmalion was made at the British Pinewood studios but distributed by Hollywood's MGM. "Everywhere the film was shown," R. J. Minney notes in his

biography of director Anthony Asquith, “its reception was rapturous and the box office takings were enormous.”⁵ Apart from the Oscar awarded to the screen writers, *Pygmalion* received Oscar nominations for Best Picture and for its leading actors, Leslie Howard (as Professor Higgins) and Wendy Hiller (as Eliza). Howard, himself associate-director with Asquith, would next play the role of Scarlett’s beloved Ashley in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Hiller, who gained instant fame in this her third film, would next play the major role in another Shavian adaptation, *Major Barbara* (1941), produced, written and directed by Pascal. Rex Harrison—later to play Higgins in *My Fair Lady*—played there the male leading role. Pascal would produce and direct yet another British adaptation of a play by Shaw, *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1946), scripted by the dramatist himself. In Hollywood, where he moved after the spectacular flop of this Shavian epic, which practically cost him his career, Pascal still made another film based on a play by Shaw: *Androcles and the Lion* (1952), his last film and homage to the then recently deceased playwright.

Shaw threw himself with relish into the task of writing for the film *Pygmalion*. Pascal and Asquith even persuaded him to write additional scenes, including the embassy reception scene which, despite being central to the story, did not feature in the original play.⁶ Shaw’s screen version of the play—not exactly *the* film screenplay, but his own hybrid stage and screen text—was published by Constable in 1941 and was followed the same year by a new edition of the play, the first edited in a separate volume.⁷ This edition of *Pygmalion*, which is the basis of the popular Penguin edition (1988, supervised by Dan H. Laurence), actually includes all the new sequences Shaw wrote for the film script. These are: for Act I, Eliza’s taking a taxi to her shabby lodgings and her daydreaming in the place itself; for Act II, Mrs. Pearce’s bathing a screaming Eliza for the benefit of her new teacher, and one of Higgins’s lessons; for

Act III, the embassy reception, and for Act IV Eliza's flight from Higgins to spend a chaste night with Freddy, a strangely frustrated elopement.

Shaw's 'Note for Technicians,' reproduced by the Penguin edition, warns that "a complete representation of the play as printed for the first time in this edition is technically possible only on the cinema screen or on stages furnished with exceptionally elaborate machinery," though this is not necessarily true.⁸ He recommends, simply, to suppress the extra scenes in less elaborate stage productions, seemingly disregarding a non-realistic staging of the play. In any case, it is important to note that the play offered to readers today is not, therefore, the play as Shaw originally wrote it, nor as it was printed in 1916, but a fusion of stage play and screen play.⁹ Since the 1941 edition only incorporates Shaw's new scenes, and not those of his collaborators, it is safe to deduce that his work for the film helped him discover new angles on his play that he thought worth keeping in further editions and, of course, future stage productions.

Despite Pascal's promises, Shaw had actually little control over the film's plot and cast. He seems not to have objected to the leading lady but he profoundly disliked Leslie Howard's performance as Higgins—Shaw's choice was Charles Laughton—on the grounds that the suave Howard "could *never* have bent Eliza to his will", somewhat forgetting that Higgins does not exactly tame Eliza in the play.¹⁰ Hiller plays the role of Eliza admirably and is quite credible in her transition from flower girl to lady, unlike the always aristocratic Audrey Hepburn of *My Fair Lady*. Throughout the film, Hiller looks, however, too intelligent not to see the consequences of her accepting Higgins's foolish experiment, and, clearly, far more mature than him. Howard's charming Higgins stresses the character's boyishness and his incorrigible manners, something which makes him far more sympathetic than

Rex Harrison's Professor in Cukor's film but also less formidable. Shaw resented the tenderness Howard added to the role, finding his characterisation excessively romantic. As shooting was in progress, a desperate Shaw wrote to Pascal: "It's amazing how hopelessly wrong Leslie is. However, the public will like him, and probably want him to marry Eliza, which is just what I don't want."¹¹ Fearing Shaw's reaction, Pascal did not tell him that the chosen ending pointed in that direction. Two days before the release a puzzled Shaw saw in a press pass how, soon after leaving Mrs. Higgins's house with Freddy, Eliza returned home to Higgins.¹² Far from welcoming her with loving arms, she is received by his tart "Where the devil are my slippers?" Not quite a romantic ending, but clearly a long way away from Shaw's intended open end.

Pygmalion, the film, should be read, therefore, as a critical version of Shaw's play. Despite Shaw's close involvement, the film is an interpretation, rather than a faithful copy, and this is due to Pascal's, Asquith's and Howard's interventions, not to mention those of the other three writers. The film does follow to a great extent Shaw's play, with little variations on Shaw's original dialogue, but, inevitably, it is just one of many possible versions of the play, never *the* play, as Shaw surely would have wished.

Perhaps the aspect that is more questionable in this otherwise fine reading, is the displacement of the time location of Eliza's metamorphosis from the original 1910s to the 1930s when the film was made. The costumes by Professor (sic) L. Czettel clearly indicate the time lapse, yet the script ignores the implications that the chronological displacement should have had in Eliza's story. Pre-World War I working-class women like her had a far more limited horizon than their 1930s counterparts, who had massively entered the work force replacing the men fighting in

the trenches, had abandoned traditional occupations such as domestic service for the higher wages of factory work, and had also gained the vote. In the 1930s—a decade of manifest political agitation—Eliza’s social naiveté would and should have been replaced by a better defined outlook on the issue of women’s employment. Yet, the film eschews the matter of how to employ the new Eliza by implicitly marrying her off to Higgins, as suggested by the slippers scene.

The film manifests, in any case, a deeper understanding of Eliza’s outward transformation than the play. The scene in her dingy lodgings shows her looking at her face in the mirror, gazing dreamily away as if wishing to see something better than her poorly-looking self. This scene is mirrored, if the pun is allowed, by the bath scene at Higgins’s in which Eliza is terrorised by the large mirror threatening to reflect her so-far unknown naked body. When Eliza takes the first lesson, after this symbolic cleansing of her working-class impurities, she has also started wearing make-up, a clear sign of her taking on a new identity. The second sequence showing her training, right before the embassy ball, has her learning from both Higgins and her other benefactor Colonel Pickering how to use her body for polite intercourse. She is taught to curtsy and dance and during the breaks she avidly teaches herself etiquette from a book. But the clearest image of how Higgins’s teaching affects her body as much as her mind is the shot of Eliza surrounded by, in her teacher’s words, the parasites—dressmakers, hairdressers, beauticians—who prepare her for triumph at the ball following the directions of a highly amused Higgins.

Shaw’s ‘neglecting’ to write the ball scene for the play—how else can Eliza’s triumph be made fully visible?—may be an indication of his own realisation that Higgins’s teaching is just one ingredient in Eliza/Cinderella’s success. Hiller’s majestic appearance at the embassy, her greatly improved looks, and the fact that her

words are hardly heard at all, suggest that her extraordinary new physical appearance, which both discovers her natural beauty and covers it with a mantle of artifice, is at the core of her metamorphosis, not just phonetics. Yet, language must still play an important role. In the modified play Eliza thinks that she has lost the bet because a lady tells her that she speaks like Queen Victoria, but the point in either play or film is that Higgins partly loses the bet he entered with Col. Pickering—a partial failure the full meaning of which he never even considers. As it happens, Higgins bets he can teach Eliza to pass herself off as an English duchess in six months but ironically he only succeeds in convincing the upper classes gathered at the embassy that Eliza is a *foreign* aristocrat.

Higgins's star pupil, the Hungarian Karpathy, declares that Eliza must be a Hungarian princess of royal blood, since only foreigners speak such perfect English. The joke is intended to stress Karpathy's gullibility but may also point at Pascal, since he shared Karpathy's nationality, and the scene, it must be remembered, was written for the film. Karpathy's conclusion heavily undermines Shaw's own message against the social discrimination that English working-class people suffer on linguistic grounds. His remark indirectly questions Higgins's ability as a teacher of phonetics, for, far from succeeding in raising Eliza socially, Higgins turns her into an outsider in her own country. The remark also deconstructs Shaw's social message, since he wilfully allows Higgins to give Eliza a kind of tuition that is completely useless for her goals, namely, employment as a shop assistant in a respectable flower shop.

Shaw himself could not come up with a solid ending for the play which could make the best of Eliza's newly acquired social graces. He abhorred the happy ending most performers and audiences favoured—the suggestion that Eliza and Higgins

would eventually marry—but could not find a suitable alternative ending. In the ‘Epilogue’ that he added in the 1916 edition of *Pygmalion*, which is a sort of report on Eliza’s imagined future rather than a new scene, he supposed that Eliza finally marries her penniless but pretty suitor Freddy (as his preferred ending supposed) and that together they run a flower and vegetable shop financed by Pickering, as they enjoy Higgins’s long-lasting friendship. Shaw’s adapters disregarded this rather implausible ending and chose for the film the obvious romantic option, also favoured by the very title of the play. This, as is well known, refers to the myth of the Greek king who fell in love with a statue he had himself made and who was granted by Aphrodite his wish that the statue became his flesh and blood wife.

In the film, the final scene with Higgins’s peremptorily demanding his slippers as Eliza smiles clearly shows that *Pygmalion* has once more succeeded in turning his work of art into the perfect wife, though in this case she’ll be an upper middle-class rather than a royal consort. Whether their marriage will turn out to be a failure or a success is mere speculation, but it is hard to see what else she could do—unless, that is, she opened her own school to teach working-class women like her to catch a wealthy husband. From a contemporary, feminist point of view, this is as disappointing as Shaw’s solution (why would Freddy be necessary in Eliza’s life?), since only marriage gives Eliza access to a higher social status. Still, given the evident attraction between Higgins and Eliza—an attraction Shaw stubbornly denied—the happy ending makes complete sense. As Nicholas Greene observes, “the final unresolved conflict between the two is the right ending for the play because it is the ultimate expression of the inalienable individuality of each.”¹³ Happy, thus, does not mean sugary, for love needn’t soften the strong personalities of Higgins and Eliza. The film’s happy ending announces the beginning of yet another battle in the war of

the sexes rather than the end of the war, though the faces of Howard's immature Higgins and Hiller's serene Eliza also announce that she will eventually impose peace on her terms.

My Fair Lady

A play with music is, technically, a melodrama. It might well be that what concerned Shaw so much as regards the possible adaptation of *Pygmalion* as a stage musical was the imposing shadow of the popular 19th century melodrama, from which Hollywood musicals actually descend, via the music-hall and other popular forms of theatre. Shaw emerged as a critic and playwright in the 1890s defending the idea that naturalism and Ibsen's work should be the paths to follow in the construction of a new serious literary theatre. This would move far beyond the restrictive models offered by the popular melodrama and the late 19th century society play, and would address a selected, educated audience, which would be the foundation for a complete upheaval of British theatrical life.

Shaw, however, did not fulfil his own Ibsenian ideal. In fact, his 'problem plays,' as he called them, are far more indebted to the more naturalistic, socially-oriented aspects of the kings of melodrama, Dion Boucicault—an Irish fellow countryman—and Tom Taylor than to Ibsen. Shaw presented himself as an avant-garde playwright in perpetual war with the censor because of the social issues he dealt with, but he had a popular—or populist—vein that Ibsen and the other main naturalists lacked and that he had clearly learned from the 19th century popular English stage. As it happens, from the 1920s onwards Shaw's plays tended to be as popular in terms of attracting large audiences as the far more conformist West End society plays of other contemporary authors. And as popular plays, they may have

become associated in the mind of Gabriel Pascal with other popular genres both on the stage and on the screen. It must be remembered that *Pygmalion*, the film, was distributed by MGM, a studio that would make a series of successful musicals in the 1940s and 1950s. The 1930s, when *Pygmalion* was made, were also the heyday of Warner Studio's early musicals, and this was the same company that would eventually film *My Fair Lady*. Pascal probably thought that *Pygmalion* would double the benefits it had already brought in by being recycled as a stage and screen musical, a genre to which its romantic story was close enough. It might be argued that the story of *Pygmalion*, the play, and its film adaptations is, thus, the story of how Shaw failed to escape the shadow of popular theatre and of how the melodrama (and I mean here the play with songs and not the lachrymose film genre) eventually conquered the film screen through the genre of the musical.

Helped by the rather lax attitude of Shaw's heirs regarding his artistic will, Pascal set in motion his long-cherished dream of transforming *Pygmalion* into a stage and screen musical. Failure and success in Pascal's career had become inextricably linked to Shaw's plays and he may have thought that a new *Pygmalion* would lead him to a second, more lasting success in Hollywood. Shortly after Shaw's death and already at work on the Hollywood production of *Androcles and the Lion*, Pascal met Alan Jay Lerner, who was working then on the film adaptation of his popular Broadway musical *Brigadoon*. He took the chance to ask Lerner to take up Shaw's *Pygmalion* but Lerner declined and suggested instead that Pascal approach Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein.¹⁴ He duly contacted them, but the team soon abandoned the project adducing that Shaw's play could not be transformed at all into a stage musical. The tenacious Pascal insisted again and finally convinced Lerner and his collaborator, composer Fredrick Loewe, to accept the challenge. They,

however, also gave up on the adaptation after six months, pleading that Shaw's comedy was too intellectual for a musical. Pascal died in 1954 without seeing his efforts come to term, but the seed of *My Fair Lady* had been already planted.

Right after Pascal's death, Lerner and Loewe decided to try again, either out of a sense of guilt at having failed Pascal, or feeling a renewed interest in the challenge posed by Shaw's text. Lerner, a cultured American, and Loewe, a no less cultured Berliner, created together a charming Broadway musical that was also "an exceptionally literate show."¹⁵ The show opened in New York, at the Mark Taper Theatre, in 1956 to raving reviews. Exceptionally for a Broadway production of that time, the cast included three leading British actors: Rex Harrison as Higgins, newcomer Julie Andrews as Eliza (this was her second Broadway play) and Stanley Holloway as Alfred Doolittle.¹⁶ The show had a run of six and a half years—2,717 performances—closing in 1962. In his autobiography Rex Harrison reminisces how the cast felt that they were "taking part in something out of the ordinary, and that it might be the only time in our lives that we would be connected with anything quite like it."¹⁷

Among those to attend the glorious opening night was studio mogul Jack Warner.¹⁸ Fascinated by the show, he persuaded Lerner to adapt it for the screen, leaving aside stage director Moss Hart, whose work, despite being the basis of much seen in the film, was not finally credited. Warner bought the rights from CBS, which had—exceptionally for this type of show—financed the Broadway production and marketed the popular records. Warner paid \$5 million, an amazing investment at the time, especially as the rights would revert to CBS in seven years' time. Even though initially Warner wanted Vincente Minelli to direct the film, he finally hired George Cukor. Minelli was discarded for asking a percentage of the film's box office,

whereas Jerome Robbins, choreographer of *West Side Story* and Warner's second choice, just rejected the offer.¹⁹ Warner's 'intelligent choice,' as the not too modest Cukor assured him, led the director to win his first Oscar.

According to Patrick McGilligan, "it was Warner who engineered the casting," including the controversial decision to cast Audrey Hepburn instead of Julie Andrews as Eliza.²⁰ This move, justified on the grounds that Andrews hadn't made any films yet, while Hepburn had indisputable box-office value, caused Lerner to withdraw from the project. Paradoxically, it helped rather than sank Andrews's career: while Hepburn's excellent performance as Eliza was slighted by the Academy, Andrews won the same year an Oscar as Best Actress for her role in Disney's *Mary Poppins*. With fine English irony, in her acceptance speech Andrews thanked Jack Warner for having made her triumph possible. As regards the male lead actor, Warner wanted Cary Grant for the role of Higgins, whereas Peter O'Toole was the choice favoured by Lerner and Cukor. The role went finally to Rex Harrison when Grant, ridiculing Warner's choice, sent him a letter claiming he would not even see the film unless Harrison was cast.²¹

Despite the stage expertise he brought to the role of Higgins, Harrison was hired for only \$200,000, whereas Audrey Hepburn was paid \$1 million. This is, in itself, a curious reversal of the roles in the play, since the female star commanded a far higher salary than the male star, something unusual then and now. The reason why Hepburn's choice was problematic was her singing voice, or rather, her lack of one. She took singing lessons and, as can be seen in the documentary accompanying the DVD version of *My Fair Lady*, she managed to sing reasonably well, though, clearly, not up to the standard the film required. Warner decided to have her voice dubbed by Marnie Nixon, who had been the singing voice of Deborah Kerr in *The*

King and I (1956) and Nathalie Wood in *West Side Story* (1961) and *Gypsy* (1962).²²

This decision was devastating to Hepburn, who seems to have missed the Oscar nomination on this account.²³

What comes as a surprise when watching Asquith and Howard's *Pygmalion* and Cukor's *My Fair Lady* is how similar they are. Entire sections of dialogue are identical, the basic lines of production design remain the same from one film to the other. The explanation for this is twofold. On the one hand, Lerner and Loewe used Shaw's screenplay—the text published in 1941—as the basis for their Broadway musical. “We,” George Cukor recalls, “used even more of Shaw's screenplay than the stage version did.”²⁴ On the other hand, the Shaw estate insisted on the musical adhering as much as possible to the original play, which is curious enough considering they had no objection at all to the production of the stage musical itself, something that Shaw would have profoundly disliked. Since the text could not be excessively tampered with, the songs act as a running commentary on the events as Shaw envisioned them. Cukor, a man who had a low opinion of musicals, agreed to direct this one precisely because for him *My Fair Lady* was “a play with music” and not a typical musical.²⁵

The conditions imposed by the Shaw estate as regards the integrity of his work and the difficult relationship between MGM and designer Cecil Beaton made the high budget of \$17million for *My Fair Lady* and Cukor's direction shine less than expected.²⁶ Still today, this musical looks imposing on the screen, but it is hard not to notice its “impersonal, oddly perfunctory quality, as if Cukor, stuck with Lerner's rigidly adherent adaptation and all the production difficulties, simply shrugged it off.”²⁷ Nonetheless, *My Fair Lady* reaped eight Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor (Rex Harrison), Best Art Direction (Cecil Beaton, Gene Allen,

George James Hopkins), Best Costume Design (Cecil Beaton), Best Cinematography, Best Sound and Best Music (André Previn). Lerner was nominated for Best Writing based on other Materials and so were Stanley Holloway (Doolittle) and Gladys Cooper (Mrs. Higgins) as Best Supporting Actors.

While the shadows of Marnie Nixon and Julie Andrews hover over Audrey Hepburn's brilliant performance, nothing—not even Leslie Howard—obscures Harrison's: he *is* Higgins. Far from Howard's tender professor, Harrison's Higgins is an insufferable bully constantly provoking Eliza. Cukor greatly appreciated Harrison's work, but the actor was concerned by a difficulty that Hepburn needn't face: Harrison couldn't help structuring his performance in front of the cameras on patterns from his theatrical performance of Higgins. "I was always conscious of this," he writes in his autobiography, "and fought it continuously."²⁸ He succeeded, though he may have been helped in this by the theatrical feel of the film. This often seems too stage bound, too subservient to the Broadway show, possibly because Cukor felt the heavy weight of its success on his shoulders. The imprint of Harrison's theatrical acting on the film is most evident in his singing. His particular style of delivering the songs through speech rather than actual singing meant that he could not act to a pre-recorded version of the song, as was usually done, for he did not follow a fixed tune. Instead, Harrison sang live on camera, using a microphone concealed under his tie, as if he were performing on the stage.

For all its charm, *My Fair Lady* is a relic of a bygone age. It could have easily become a lost relic if a campaign run by the unfailing Martin Scorsese hadn't saved the film's delicate 70mm SuperPanavision negative from total destruction. A print restored thanks to expensive infographics was re-released by 20th Century Fox in 1994 to celebrate the film's 30th anniversary. The fascinating documentary made to

publicise this artistic restoration has an unsettling effect. Clearly, *My Fair Lady* seems worth preserving for posterity, if only to document the rich connections between Broadway and Hollywood. Yet, especially in contrast with the more naturalistic British *Pygmalion*, *My Fair Lady* appears to be a sample of an old-fashioned style of American filmmaking based on stressing the artificial atmosphere of the studio set. Cukor's film eschews all attempts at being realistic, thus indirectly emphasising Shaw's sense of what he called romance, that is to say, an exceedingly improbable story.

This artificiality is especially noticeable in the famous Ascot sequence. With its stunning costumes and controlled use of colour—black, white and grey dominate—Beaton's production design for the scene underlines the idea that Eliza and Higgins's world is not the real England of the 1910s. The Ascot scene couldn't be realistic, Cukor agreed. "Nor could the picture as a whole," he added. "It had to take place in a kind of dream world. You couldn't show the real Covent Garden, or the real Wimpole Street—you had to get the essence of things rather than the actuality."²⁹ Nothing prevented the cameras from filming real London; but what Cukor possibly hints at is that, beyond the close allegiance to the stage show, which so strongly conditions the film, the relationship between Higgins and Eliza could only be retold in the 1960s from this dream world perspective. If the gap between the 1910s of the original play and the 1930s of Asquith's *Pygmalion* is perceptible, the gap between the 1910s and the revolutionary 1960s is a chasm. *My Fair Lady* was not alone in this strange dislocation. Other sentimental musicals like *The Sound of Music* (1965) might also seem now unlikely products of the supposedly countercultural 1960s, especially if compared to more modern films like *West Side Story* (1961).

Shaw would be probably appalled to learn that the verbal music of his play was not, after all, enough. Running to 170 minutes, *My Fair Lady* is 75 minutes longer than *Pygmalion*. Much of that extra time—if not all—is taken by up by Lerner and Loewe’s eighteen memorable songs. In fact, a spectator seeing Asquith’s *Pygmalion* after seeing *My Fair Lady* cannot help noticing how conspicuous the absence of the songs is in the former. One is tempted to stop the VCR and burst out singing to make up for that absence, certainly the highest tribute that can be paid to Lerner and Loewe’s work. Their successful contribution is based on their realisation that Shaw could not comment on his characters’ intimate feelings. Only monologues and asides to the audience could do this but would feel completely out of place in *Pygmalion*, the play. Wisely using the poetic licence that the conventions of the musical granted them, Lerner and Loewe felt free to comment through the songs on the characters’ emotions in a way that Shaw could not. And since the essential aspects of Shaw’s texts are maintained, *My Fair Lady* turns out to be a richer version of Shaw’s own *Pygmalion*, a compound of the text and a highly intelligent extended commentary.

In fact, despite lacking the lavish dance scenes of most musicals, *My Fair Lady* can be said to be typical of its genre. This is especially so as regards the use of the songs, for, as Martin Sutton explains, the aim of the numbers in a musical is to relieve the tension between the realistic plots and the “romantic/rogue imagination” at battle with the restraining social order which the plot reflects.³⁰ As he further explains, “the musical finally turns its wayward dreamers into conformists,” so that “women, for example, are forced to accept male heterosexual society’s definition of themselves.”³¹ This applies to Lerner’s lyrics, in which, essentially what is commented on is what Shaw excludes from his text, namely, romance. The

conventions of the musical thus make the covert battle between reality, personified by Higgins's adamant stance towards his pupil, and Eliza's imagination more explicit in *My Fair Lady* than in the original play. This does not mean, however, that the musical allows for a less ambiguous ending than Shaw's play, since, paraphrasing Sutton's comment, both aim basically at subordinating Eliza to Higgins's view of herself.

Hence, the importance of the apparently trivial matter of the slippers. By the end of *My Fair Lady* the conflict between Higgins and Eliza is practically at the same stage as in *Pygmalion*, the film. Harrison's Higgins is so stubbornly set against marrying Eliza that audiences know he will no doubt marry her. There is no tension in that sense, since the narratives codes of the Broadway and Hollywood musical point invariably towards the conventional happy end. Apart from the fact that Eliza never seriously considers going away with Freddy in *My Fair Lady*, the main difference with *Pygmalion* the film, is the impression that in Asquith's version Higgins and Eliza may come to an eventual understanding sooner than in Cukor's film. Harrison's mordant Higgins and Hepburn's impetuous Eliza make peace between them less certain. When he demands Eliza to fetch his slippers the spectator smiles, anticipating a formidable battle that will last for years, maybe their whole life together. This effect is stressed by the songs, which display a wide range of feelings otherwise kept under control by Shaw's characters, as has been noted. Eliza goes from the anger of "Just you Wait Henry Higgins," which includes a daydream in which she has a tyrannical Higgins executed, to "I Could have Danced all Night," when she celebrates her newly discovered passion for Higgins. Shaw's Eliza cannot reach these extremes. And in any case, Hiller's Eliza just needn't, for her *Pygmalion* is far less excessive than Harrison's.

An overlooked aspect that problematises the relationship between Higgins and Eliza in *My Fair Lady* is the physical appearance of Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn. In comparison to Leslie Howard's youthful Professor, Harrison's looks stress his status as a confirmed bachelor; Hepburn—twenty years younger—looks in fact young enough to be his daughter, which is not the case at all in the 1938 *Pygmalion*.³² Although there are plenty of real-life couples with even bigger age differences, for Shaw the gap between the Professor (a man in his forties) and Eliza (a twenty-year-old girl) is, simply, too wide: hence Freddy. “Unless Freddy is biologically repulsive to her,” he writes in the Epilogue, “and Higgins biologically attractive to a degree that overwhelms all her other instincts, [Eliza] will, if she marries either of them, marry Freddy.”³³ Shaw's coy use of the word “biologically” instead of “sexually” does not essentially alter the meaning of his sentence. Shaw believed that the Life Force controls the evolution of the human race, which thrives thanks to appropriate breeding brought about by natural forces, that is to say, by sexual or “biological” attraction. Higgins's higher intellect may make him “more suitable breeding material than Freddy”, but Shaw seems to favour a quite pragmatic view of sexual attraction by which women select their mates following sheer biological rules aimed at improving the ‘race’.³⁴ The young, handsome Freddy should be, according to Shaw's logic, the natural eugenic choice for a twenty year old girl who, moved by the Life Force, would look for a physically rather than an intellectually fit mate.

Shaw's somewhat bizarre philosophy of reproduction clashes with Hollywood casting policies in *My Fair Lady* with an intriguing result. The romantic ending of the film has in fact an anti-romantic sting hidden in its tail. In *Pygmalion*, the film, the sexual competition for Eliza's favours between Leslie Howard as Higgins and

David Tree as Freddy is won hands down by Howard's smooth Higgins. Tree, an attractive man who plays Freddy as a fatuous young man too fond of sniggering, has little to do with *My Fair Lady's* Jeremy Brett, a more mature, much less foolish Freddy. When Brett/Freddy sings "The Street where You Live" as he waits for a glimpse of his beloved Eliza he appears to be the quintessential romantic lover, far above the play's original Freddy, a silly boy devoted to writing bad poetry. When Hepburn/Eliza sings "Show me" to him, openly asking for love, it is evident that Hepburn and Brett make an attractive couple. Since Freddy's glaring defects are smoothed out by Brett's dandy looks and romantic performance, Harrison's fatherly bachelor appears to be a far less likely choice for young Eliza than in the play or in Pascal's film. The happy ending of *My Fair Lady* acquires thus strange overtones. Why, indeed, would Hepburn/Eliza feel an overwhelming 'biological' attraction for Harrison/Higgins, preferring him over Brett/Freddy?

When Eliza sings "I could have Danced all Night," after discovering her passion for Higgins, contemporary spectators must suspend their disbelief to accept that she does love dull, old Higgins.³⁵ Unless, that is, we assume that she was so terribly starved for affection as a child that she seeks it now in Higgins seen as an idealised father figure—or that the play *Pygmalion*, despite its problematic ending, is nothing more than the sexual fantasy of a middle-aged man. Classic Hollywood films, of course, tended to please male cinema goers by offering them fantasies in which middle-aged men seduced young women. Such films include other popular stage and screen musicals such as *Gigi* (1958)—actually a variation on the Pygmalion theme also scripted by Lerner—or *Funny Face* (1957), also starring Audrey Hepburn. Whatever audiences may have felt in the 1960s, in our ironic, post post-modern 21st century, in which films are fantasies addressed to younger audiences, Eliza's meek

return to Higgins at the end of *My Fair Lady* manifests how unlikely the romance between these two persons is. Even though this is precisely what Shaw wanted the audiences to feel, the impression that Higgins and Eliza are mismatched is, ironically, a side-effect of the accidents of casting and of film history rather than a carefully considered choice. Suddenly, the Eliza of Shaw's preferred ending—the girl who chooses to marry and support useless Freddy rather than serve authoritarian Higgins—seems far more real than the artificial Eliza of this charmingly artificial musical film.

In a sense, Eliza had to undergo yet another transformation to leave romance behind. The film based on Willy Russell's stage play *Educating Rita* (1980, film 1983)—a text clearly inspired by Shaw's *Pygmalion*—significantly alters the terms of the Freddy-Eliza-Higgins triangle. Rita—Eliza's successor—is a dissatisfied woman in her mid twenties, a hairdresser by profession, married to an uncaring young man who wants her only to fulfil his sexual needs and become the mother of his children. Rita seeks a solution to her dissatisfaction in education, meeting her Pygmalion when she enrolls in the Open University. Her tutor there, Frank, is a dejected, alcoholic version of Higgins, too much in need of Rita's help for her own good. She succeeds with his help in extricating herself from her working-class empty life to embark on a quite idealised life as a Literature student while Frank's career and private life collapse under the pressure of his self-pity. As Shaw wanted, romance is avoided and Rita sends Frank off to a new life in Australia in a gesture intended to show how close they have been and how far they drift apart, once she becomes her own woman. Rita, more truly Shavian than Pascal's or Cukor's Elizas, shows in this way she would never fetch Higgins's slippers.

Gabriel Pascal's film *Pygmalion*, Alan Jay Lerner's stage musical *My Fair Lady* and George Cukor's film version are, as I have shown here, not just mere copies of G. B. Shaw's play *Pygmalion* but texts engaged in an active dialogue with Shaw's original play, especially as regards Eliza's fate. The main bulk of the dialogue deals, in any case, with the tension between author and adapter for the control over the screen adaptation, a tension which is unavoidable in the cases in which the original author understands, as Shaw did, that the adaptation must respect its literary source - a point which is, clearly, debatable. Shaw's authorial resistance simply slowed down an unstoppable process that Pascal's persistence had set in motion when he first thought of filming *Pygmalion*, and that gathered momentum once Shaw died. Lerner's and Cukor's works combined the fidelity to Shaw's text imposed by his legal heirs with the breach of trust opened by Pascal's idea of turning *Pygmalion* into a musical despite Shaw's dislike of the genre. The success of *My Fair Lady* simply proves that the concept of literary authorship has been deeply questioned in the 20th century by the pragmatics—the business practices—of filmmaking and that authorial resistance will never prevail over the adapter's persistence. This persistence, to conclude, must not be seen as betrayal but just as another source of artistic creativity. Perhaps the literary author's deepest anxieties should not be aroused, after all, by the fear that the adaptation will betray its literary source, but by the fear that the film might be artistically superior to its source. Had Shaw seen *My Fair Lady* this might have been his main worry.

Notes

¹ Rex Harrison, *Rex, an Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 162.

² Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw. Volume 2: 1898-1918 The Pursuit of Power* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), 333.

³ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁴ Conrado Xalabarder, *Enciclopedia de los Óscars* (Barcelona: Ediciones B, 1996), 1049.

⁵ R. J. Minney, *Puffin Asquith: The Biography of the Honourable Anthony Asquith Aristocrat, Aesthete, Prime Minister's Son and Brilliant Film Maker* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1973), 93.

⁶ Nor did Higgins's lessons. A phonetics advisor employed on set is credited with the famous drill "the rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain," while Asquith himself came up with the sentence about the scarcity of hurricanes in Hereford.

⁷ For a more recent edition of the screenplay see Bernard F. Dukore, ed, *Collected Screenplays of Bernard Shaw*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980.

⁸ Bernard Shaw, "Note for Technicians," *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts* ed. Dan H. Laurence (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 11.

⁹ The fusion, however, keeps its secrets. Higgins's Hungarian pupil is called Aristid Karpathy in the film *Pygmalion*—he is Zoltan Karpathy in *My Fair Lady* but Nepommuck in the 1941 version of the play. The divergence between versions is small but, after seeing *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* and reading the play it is hard to tell each version apart.

¹⁰ Minney, 97; original emphasis.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Holroyd, 133.

¹³ Nicholas Greene, *Bernard Shaw: A Critical View* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 112.

¹⁴ See Robert Matthew-Walker, *Broadway to Hollywood: The Enthralling Story behind the Great Hollywood Films of the Great Broadway Musicals* (London: Sanctuary Publishing Ltd., 1996), 133.

¹⁵ Matthew-Walker, 133.

¹⁶ My main source in this section is Matthew-Walker (1996). See also Keith Garebian, *The Making of My Fair Lady* (Toronto: ECW, 1994).

¹⁷ Harrison, 173.

¹⁸ See Patrick McGilligan, *George Cukor: A Double Life* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1991), 280.

¹⁹ See Gavin Lambert, *On Cukor* (New York: Capricorn Book, 1973), 240.

²⁰ McGilligan, 281.

²¹ Harrison and Holloway played the show in London, too. The play opened at the Drury Lane theatre in 1958, and ran for 2,281 performances, just under six years. Warner wanted James Cagney, who was by then retired, to play the role of Alfred Doolittle. It is hard to imagine what could make him preferable to Stanley Holloway; in the end, the role went to Holloway because Cagney rejected it (see McGilligan, 285).

²² Nixon is still an active singer. She has recently played the role of Grandmother Fa in Disney's *Mulan* (1998). Jeremy Brett, who played the role of Freddy, was also dubbed, in his case by tenor Bill Shirley, who, similarly, was uncredited.

²³ McGilligan, 287.

²⁴ Lambert, 244.

²⁵ McGilligan, 279.

²⁶ British designer and photographer Cecil Beaton had designed the costumes for the New York and London productions of the show and made new designs for Cukor's film. His splendid work is one of the main attractions of *My Fair Lady*, but it seems quite clear now that he attributed to himself the production design actually carried out by George Allen, which caused constant tensions on the set (see Lambert, 241).

²⁷ McGilligan, 292.

²⁸ Harrison, 209.

²⁹ Lambert, 242.

³⁰ Martin Sutton, 'Patterns of Meaning in the Musical' in *Genre: The Musical* ed. Rick Altman (London: BFI, 1981), 191.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

³² Rex Harrison (56) and Audrey Hepburn (35) were too old for the roles. Leslie Howard (41) and Wendy Hiller (26) were closer, though Hiller was still 6 years too old. Curiously enough, Hepburn looks younger than Hiller. In any case, Mrs. Patrick Campbell first played the role of Eliza, which Shaw had written specifically for her, aged 47.

³³ Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts* ed. Dan H. Laurence (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), 138.

³⁴ Arthur Ganz, *George Bernard Shaw* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 180.

³⁵ On the three occasions I have taught the play my students, mostly undergraduate girls of Eliza's age, have steadily refused to believe her declaration of love for Higgins in *My Fair Lady*, preferring Freddy. When reading the play, their opinions about the ending were sharply divided, though. Only a few dared voice the opinion that Eliza should remain single and happily independent at the end of the play against the majority's preference for romance with either Higgins or Freddy.