

Re:Adapted – The Phantoms of the Opera

2. Lon Chaney and the Bones of Adaptation

Welcome to Re:Adapted, where we take a work and explore why we keep telling the same story over, and over, and over. I'm your host, Kris Pepper Hambrick. This season, we're looking at a long-time favorite of mine, *The Phantom of the Opera*. And after last week's run-down of the original novel, we've got our first film!

Well, the first film we're able to analyze, anyway. There is a record of a film shot in Germany in 1915, but nothing of the film remains, including stills. There are many early films which have been tragically lost through mishandling, fire, or simply a lack of regard for a new medium whose future might still have seemed uncertain.

Universal's 1925 extravaganza, on the other hand, is so *not* lost that it's hard to determine what the definitive version actually is. This movie exists in various cuts in various formats because it lapsed out of copyright in 1953, and thus is available with different soundtracks, edits, and both with and without the experimental "two-strip technicolor" scenes that were a stunning feat back in the day. It's interesting to note that, while not exactly the best Hollywood's silent era has to offer, it's somehow lasted in the public imagination. Erik is not included in the pantheon of "Universal Monsters" that get reissued every Halloween, but the distinctive makeup Lon Chaney developed for the role does show up in pop culture and is referenced time and again. The fact that the image itself is a plot point in movies from 1977's Nancy Drew/Hardy Boys episode "The Mystery of the Hollywood Phantom" to the Disney Channel's 2000 drama *Phantom of the Megaplex* implies that someone involved, anyway, still thought the image had currency. Or wanted to maintain that currency for another generation.

And in truth, the performance itself is still stunning. Whatever else this movie lacks, whatever faults lay in its troubled

production, it's a showcase for Lon Chaney and the film he's most remembered for in a fabled career as the "Man of a Thousand Faces." The son of Deaf parents, Chaney had both a knack for nonverbal communication and a penchant for portraying society's outsiders. Many of his roles involve some form of social or physical ostracization, whether he's playing a sad clown or a man without legs running a criminal empire. He was willing to put his body through any rigor in order to obtain uncanny effects, and was a master at makeup and body modifying creations. But one watches a Lon Chaney movie not simply to see what hell he's putting himself through this time, but also to witness the humanity that suffuses these characters, even the worst of them. They all feel pain, and they all let the audience in on their secret struggle.

So it was utterly natural for him to tackle the Phantom, which by this point had been in print in English for over ten years. Today, we're going to tell the story of Rupert Julian's 1925 film, how it compares to the novel, and in general what it means to adapt a novel from a verbal medium to a visual, but silent, one.

Let's talk about that last part for a minute. I want to put some terminology out there so we can be clear about what we mean when we talk about various aspects of "adaptation." Brian McFarlane in his book *Novel to Film* makes a distinction between "transfer" and "adaptation." I've been using "adaptation" to mean the overall process of taking a book and creating a movie from it, because this is commonly used language. But I also want to dig a little deeper into what we mean when we talk about adapting a work into a new medium. For our purposes, let's use McFarlane's vocabulary and use 'transfer' to talk about things that can be lifted directly from a novel to a film and 'adaptation' for things that must be communicated through some other means. In the case of a silent movie, for example, you can use lines of dialogue directly from the novel in the intertitles. That's a transfer of that narrative element. But narration in a novel is a very different thing from narration in a film. Novels are told; films are presented. So even if this film remains quote-unquote faithful in

large part to the novel, it must do so by adapting words into images, movements, and editing.

This might sound very obvious and basic, but what I'm trying to get at is that a lot of us prize 'fidelity' when we talk about the film version of a beloved text, but that word is actually not very useful when you consider the amount of 'adapting' that goes into the process of turning words into images and sounds. Faithful to what? The basic events of the plot? The character descriptions your imagination summoned when reading the text? The book's ethical or moral worldview?

As you can start to imagine, things become very complicated very quickly. The experience of reading a book is a conversation between two people: the writer and the reader. The writer sets their understanding down, and the reader picks it up and ascribes to it whatever interpretation might be suggested not only by the words on the page but their own preconceived biases and background. So when a studio takes a property and hundreds of people begin to put their interpretation of a writer's words into another format, notions of fidelity quickly become muddled. In other words, your version of faithful may be very different from my own, based on the exact same book, and so each of us might have a very different understanding of the end result of someone else's interpretation.

I'm going to use this initial 1925 version to talk about some of these logistical difficulties. Some of them will arise from the change in medium itself, and some will come from the very real pressures that surround an expensive motion picture that is, in the end, intended as a money-making product for a corporation. It also has a lot to do with the context in which Universal was operating in 1925, versus the context of a reporter-turned-fiction writer in 1909.

When *Phantom* began pre-production in 1923, it was in response to the wild popularity of Lon Chaney's portrayal of the hunchback Quasimodo in that year's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. From a

genre perspective, you should get a big flashing clue right there-- given what we talked about last episode, the presence of a physically anomalous main character is only one aspect of Gaston Leroux's novel, and while both novels have beautiful love interests, handsome suitors, and gothic elements, in tone and plot they're really not much alike at all. From the beginning, the studio started to tone down the mystery elements, eliminating from script drafts Erik's backstory, his past with the Persian, and scenes like the eyes at the foot of Raoul's bed or the graveyard at Perros. Today, this seems hard to believe, but in 1923 there was little call for what we now call the "horror" genre. It's not that there weren't movies dabbling in those waters, but there was nothing codified yet, and thus no clamor from audiences or studios for anything *specifically* in the horror/thriller vein. You may be familiar with films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *The Phantom Carriage*, or *Nosferatu*, but even those films today play like progenitors, not genre templates. *Phantom*, as a studio construction, should be first and foremost understood as a prestige vehicle for Lon Chaney and an attempt not to lose the tremendous amount of money being spent on it.

As such, I have to say honestly that it's a little bit of a mess as a film, rightly remembered for Chaney's performance (and the unmasking scene) but in many other respects stilted and uninspired. If, like me, you began your ventures into silent cinema with this movie because of an interest in *Phantom of the Opera*, I would urge you not to stop here. This movie does happen to fall prey to a lot of the stereotypes we throw at silent movies, and there are a lot better examples of true art or even just good fun, so don't let that stop you from checking out some other titles.

When you delve into production, you can see how this happened. Competing forces were there from the beginning: despite having optioned *Phantom*, a novel with a great deal of, you know, mystery in it, the initial treatment aroused doubts in studio readers. Citing the lack of success of mystery films (if you can even imagine that), script reviewers fretted over the darker

elements and said that it would be important to emphasize the romance. In the meantime, construction began on a full scale recreation of the auditorium of the Paris Opera, requiring a new stage to hold it. (This set would, at least, last long enough to house several other productions, including the remake in 1943.)

On the directorial front, Rupert Julian was hired based on his cleanup job of Eric von Stroheim's wildly extravagant *Merry-Go-Round*; not von Stroheim's first go round at losing the studio a ton of money. Having stepped in and kept the film close to budget, he was promoted to directing the most prestigious film Universal had tried yet, essentially on the basis of his ability to not be von Stroheim rather than any actual directorial artistry. Most of those who worked with him remark upon one of two things: that he affected a militaristic and severe manner but had great personal style, and that he knew very little about the actual art or science of filmmaking. He was great at *looking like* a director.

But why would they need a real director, when Lon Chaney and the expensive set were going to sell the movie on their own? To highlight the work done to authentically recreate Gay Paree in Hollywood, the masquerade ball, the opera scenes, and others were all planned in an early color process that ended up being two-strip Technicolor. An elephant was bought for a Persian flashback scene. This was going to be a big movie, and nothing could get in the way of it turning a profit.

Including, ironically, things like Persian flashback scenes as well as anything relating to Christine's life outside the opera house. Elliot Clawson's script, largely faithful to the bones of Leroux, became pared down as concerns about macabre elements and horror gruesomeness prevailed. Elements vaguely waving at humor were added, as was the setup for the class warfare that provides the mob for the movie's new ending—which we'll get to in a minute. Interestingly, they kept the torture chamber sequence intact; one of the only versions that even touches it.

Mary Philbin was hired to play Christine, and Norman Kerry for Raoul. They'd appeared together in *Merry-Go-Round* and thus knew Rupert Julian already. And they both have Phantomish connections in their other films: Kerry had already played the handsome soldier Phoebus in *Hunchback* (thus pitting him against Chaney for a woman's affections multiple times, which would happen again in *The Unknown*). Mary Philbin would go on to play Dea, the object of Gwynplaine's affections in *The Man Who Laughs* opposite Conrad Veidt a few years later, though this one ends better for the ugly guy. Arthur Edmund Carewe, a Turkish-born Armenian American, was hired to play the Persian.

Production was as troubled as pre-production had been, with the cast and crew quickly turning against Rupert Julian, whose pompous nature did not pair well with the general sense he didn't know what he was doing. Chaney refused to speak to him, and essentially did whatever he wanted. Philbin suffered through endless shoots when Julian found it necessary to 'reposition' her legs, uh, manually. His dog wandered around on set. At one point, he insisted the scene with the chandelier wasn't dark enough, to the point where you wouldn't have been able to see it fall, until cinematographer Charles Van Enger basically tricked him into looking 'through' a poker chip instead of a colored glass to check contrast. The film had a terrible preview in Los Angeles, with comment cards offering critique such as, "There's too much spook melodrama. Put in some gags to relieve the tension." Which is just what the front office had said. Furthermore, the ending was utterly rejected by studio heads.

You see, Clawson had retained at least the redemptive nature of Leroux's finale, which had been shot despite Julian's doubts. Christine agrees to Erik's demands, and kisses him. Erik himself succumbs to the purity of her gesture and dies at his keyboard as a mob, angry at Buquet's death, arrives. But this was not going to fly in the offices of Universal, which issued this rather astonishingly pessimistic understanding of human nature: "A monster, such as the phantom... who delighted in crime could not have been redeemed through a woman's kiss, nor could a girl

who had witnessed his diabolical acts have been moved to kiss him merely because he drooped his head sadly. His death rang false, moreover. Better to have kept him a devil to the end."

So production was halted, Julian either left or was fired, and the fast-moving western genre unit was called in to reshoot a bunch of the movie under Edward Sedgwick's direction. Sub-plots were added with comic relief and yet another rival for Christine's affection. This, previewed, also met with disapproval from audiences.

So there was a *third* version edited, re-adding a bunch, but not all, of the older stuff and cutting out most of the new stuff except for the mob which throws the Phantom into the river. And that is what we have today, though there are still slight variations in the prints that are floating around out there. In addition, a 1930 sound reissue altered certain elements, and the only prints of the original 1925 release that exist are incomplete 16mm "show at home" versions.

But enough of the background. What ended up in this movie? If this is the film that basically released *Phantom* to a larger audience than Leroux could ever have imagined, and launched all later imitators, what is it? What does it tell us about this story's role in our culture, since this is the very first time it's been *redone*?

In my opinion, the major thing that changes aside from any plot points or omissions is this: that by moving from print to visual image, our fundamental relationship to the story and characters has made its first essential transformation.

Because film must adapt the written word into images, sounds, and cultural codes, we experience it very differently from a novel. On the page, we're forced to imagine the sights and sounds that are set down by an author (or character) whose objectivity is also in question. By the time it gets to the screen, all the things that you and I might read slightly differently have been solidified into a singular "vision." Now, we can both still read that movie

differently, depending on our own perceptions and backgrounds. But what I mean is really that what once existed as a more or less overtly "subjective" account, on the page, now *appears* to be objective. It's very easy to read Leroux's author's notes, or the Persian's account, for example, and recognize that they are colored by that person's real or imagined worldview. The biggest shift, I'd argue, from the novel to the silent film version is that we're now primed to accept what we see as "reality." Naturally I don't mean that it really happened--but we are not meant to question the camera's account of events--or character qualities. We do not question the camera's role as narrator.

But this would be true of most, if not all, traditional book-to-film adaptations. What does that mean for this story? Not only does the film remove any hints to Erik's sympathetic background and his attempt at redemption, it removes the framework through which we're asked to *question* the version of events which condemns a person solely for his actions without any reference to why or how he got there. Remember, Leroux never asks that we excuse anything Erik did. But he does ask us to consider the context, and exercise empathy for someone who had more stacked against him than most. I would argue that the film not only doesn't do that, but *cannot* in the same way a novel can, by offering a subjective viewpoint. Film is immediate, experiential, concrete, in a way that words on a page, by the very mechanism we take them in, are not. As Brian McFarlane says in *Novel to Film*, novels are told; films are *presented*. And the complication of this is that what we call 'discursive prose,' the part of a novel that teaches us *how* to read the dialogue and the character's motives, is very difficult to adapt. The metalanguage can be coded in the editing or camera angle or the setting, but it's a lot fuzzier language with no real agreed upon consistency.

What I'm trying to say here is that the 1925 version of *Phantom* not only shows us a fundamentally less sympathetic Phantom in its plot and editing choices, but does not have access to an interpreter who might code what we're seeing in a more sympathetic light. Not only do we lose Leroux's framing narrative,

and Christine's exercise of compassion, but Erik's only would-be friend, the Persian, was altered in one of the re-edits into Inspector Ledoux of the Paris Suerte, inexplicably still wearing his astrakhan hat. This actually drastically reduces his power in the story, since despite his exalted position he's still ignored by everyone until it's too late. It also removes his intimacy with the phantom and his potential for offering the audience an alternative, more nuanced viewpoint.

Later films will address the notion of sympathy for the title character, but they will do it in other ways, by altering plot and backstory, as we shall see. This has the effect of fundamentally altering what the story is *about*, but that process has already begun here. While Chaney's Phantom is still a 'villain' in the sense that he does, indeed, commit crimes of his own free will, there are other thematic forces at work which in a sense alter the nature of these crimes and the thrust of the novel. Specifically, issues of class, highbrow vs lowbrow art, and the very nature of 'threat.'

In the original novel, the threat Erik presents is coded vaguely Germanic, but also 'oriental,' and I'm using that term in quotes to deliberately evoke the colonialist attitudes of the time. The threat is to the virtue of a young woman, but also her choice in marriage; while Philippe does not approve, the novel seems to offer no protest to the notion of young de Chagny marrying a chorus girl and elevating her status. Raoul is going to take her away to a better life, where she does not *have* to work. And what's threatening that is a man with a very non-French 'k' at the end of his given name, who isn't necessarily *from* the East but brings its trappings and a Persian nemesis/sidekick with him, who employs something called a "punjab lasso." In the film, while a lot of this is nominally intact, all references to his Persian history, the Persian's *own* identity, and the exotic trappings of his home and demeanor are removed. Instead, Erik's history is given only as a part of the carceral system, his home and trappings (including the chase past the facade of Notre Dame) evoke far more the tension between the medieval/Catholic vs the modern,

and his chief enemy and in fact his downfall is *the people*, in a sort of corrupt aristocrat vs the mob conflict that actually mirrors the behind the scenes tug of war over whether this was a middle class melodrama, or a low-brow comedy.

In this telling, Erik is not only a gothic threat to Christine, but an entrepreneurial threat to the worker. While set some forty or so years in the past, the plight of a single woman in the workplace in 1925 cannot be ignored, nor can the increasing income inequality that would soon come to a head after the stock market crash of 1929. Because this isn't, after all, a movie about Paris in 1880. Even since the novel's publication, a lot has changed. Women are increasingly visible not only in the workplace, but as sexually liberated people with agency—who therefore are all the more ready prey for the unscrupulous. Populist movements and worker reform efforts have raised awareness of class struggle, possibly as mirrored in the film's increased attention to the anger of the backstage grunts who are tired of being murdered while just trying to do their jobs. In addition, there's been a world war that resulted in the death but, more to the point here, disfigurement of soldiers. I do not think it's a coincidence that Lon Chaney rose to prominence by depicting men with various disabilities in a period shortly following a war whose modern weapons and modern medical techniques left permanently scarred many who would have died in previous wars. While these elements—women's liberation, veterans' issues, and workers' rights—are all different threads, all together they present a different sort of world, with different concerns, than Leroux's original.

It is a different entertainment world, too, than 1880, or even 1911. By this point, the popularity of *Dracula* and other gothic novels would have reached a wider audience, both in novel and stage form. *Dracula* shares with *Phantom* certain common anxieties about eastern incursion and female endangerment. On that note, *Trilby*, George du Maurier's novel of eastern (and, for the record, anti-semitic) predation on innocent Parisian singing ingenues, had received multiple film adaptations by this point.

One of them even starred our very own Arthur Edmund Carewe as the mesmerist and sexual predator, Svengali.

All of this is to say that *Phantom*, as a film, exists in a world familiar with powerful, though unsavory, men with hypnotic allure over their female targets. It is, perhaps, telling that both Trilby and Christine are young women attempting to make their way in a world fraught with danger. It's also a world newly familiar with the horrors of war and what it means to survive it. And a world of increasing wealth held in the hands of the few. As such, the anxieties it exhibits feel less personal than Leroux's concerns about compassion for the individual, and more about larger, societal changes.

And I think there's an argument that this is also, in part, a factor in adapting a novel into a film. As I have stated before, the novel is a conversation between two people: the writer, and the reader. A film, on the other hand, is designed by many, to be watched by many (at a time). Both as a function of the many hands responsible for its creation, and its need (financially, as well as artistically) to appeal to a greater number of people, it is almost inherently less personal. And I see this as one of the greatest differences between the novel and this first film: the erosion of empathy and compassion in favor of broad strokes and mob scenes. The empathy is still there, but because of plot choices as well as the lack of a viewpoint narrator it must be carried entirely by Lon Chaney's face. Most importantly, there is no room for redemption in this world, because the higher ups think there is no profit in it, negating any desire on Leroux's part to tell a story with a somewhat more complicated moral outlook.

There's one final aspect of this particular adaptation I want to bring up, and that is: sound. By necessity at the time it was made, this is a silent film about a singer and her mentor with a voice so otherworldly he can make it sound like it's coming from across the room, or from Heaven. Given the constraints of the medium, this is, of course, excusable. However, within a few years of its release, sound was a big selling point, and so they

recalled many of the actors (and some new ones) to record sound and a few new scenes. However, they were contractually unable to retain Chaney's services, so the Angel of Music remains silent. It's curious that there is a sound version of *Phantom* where the Phantom neither talks nor sings. As an interesting side-note, this "silent monster" trope actually persists into several of the classics of early horror talkies: *Frankenstein's* creature is famously mute in his first film, and even the debonair *Dracula* portrayed by Bela Lugosi is relatively short on dialogue. Whether for technical or artistic reasons, the result is a monstrous figure not only cut off from society, but literally denied a voice.

All of these factors: adaptation, genre, society's view on both the downtrodden and women, empathy, and commercial gain will come into play in various forms throughout the rest of our discussion. Sometimes these crop up within the plot and themes themselves, and sometimes they exist as external forces shaping how and why the story gets told. As it is, the Lon Chaney *Phantom* is still more or less, one of the better made and, for a given value, the most faithful to the text of the original novel.

In our next episode, we'll explore the 1943 Universal film starring Claude Rains and the 1962 Hammer Horror film starring Herbert Lom. Using those, we'll reassess how sympathy is handled and encounter a major shift in the plot and backstory of the Phantom himself, one that will leave its mark, so to speak, on adaptations to come.

Thank you for listening to Re:Adapted. This show was written and produced by me, Kris Pepper Hambrick. Please feel free to contact me at readaptedpodcast at gmail, Facebook, or instagram, or readaptedpod on twitter with comments, questions, and suggestions. You can also find complete transcripts at my website, readaptedpodcast.com. Until next time, look not upon my mask - think rather of my devotion which has brought you the gift of song. See you then!

Sources

Hogle, Jerrold E. *The Undergrounds of the Phantom of the Opera: Sublimation and the Gothic in Leroux's Novel and its Progeny*. Palgrave Macmillan New York, 2002.

MacQueen, Scott. "Phantom of the Opera." *American Cinematographer*, Oct. 1989.

McFarlane, Brian. *Novel To Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.