

Sweeney Todd: Adapting a Victorian Urban Legend

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at examining two neo-Victorian adaptations of the legend of Sweeney Todd: Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd. The Demon Barber of Fleet Street. A Musical Thriller* (1979) and Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007). Firstly, taking the analytical tenets of Adaptation theories as a point of departure, I will consider the medium-specific features of theatre and cinema that come out in the play and the film referred above respectively. Secondly, I will look into how violence is portrayed in each adaptation and I will peruse the social-political resonances of the legend in general by tracing briefly its adaptation evolution from the nineteenth century up to nowadays.

Keywords: Sweeney Todd, violence, Sondheim, Burton

1. Introduction

Modern Fleet Street, set in central London, was the printing home both of British earliest tabloids as well as cheap sensation fiction in Victorian times (Sligo 2011: no pages; Springhall 1994: 568). This geographical spot hosts the legend of the sanguinary Sweeney Todd, the eerie tale of the barber who cut his customers' throats to be manufactured later into meat pies by Mrs. Lovett in her pie-shop, and that has become a landmark in London urban mythology. Just as the buildings of Fleet Street were devoted both to the publication of fact (newspapers) and fiction (serial novels), the tale of the demon barber has been historically enclosed in a halo of uncertainty between history and myth.

Although perusing factual episodes contributing to the legendary status of Sweeney Todd would be an arduous albeit fascinating task, the focus of this paper is, however, the artistic adaptation of the legend. The anonymous text *The String of Pearls* (1846-47) is the earliest appearance of the legend in British literature. This Victorian text was inserted within a literary mode known as penny bloods, fiction for the working classes which were critically disregarded at the time as very low literature, and dealt with sensational topics, madness, crime, the underworld, the gothic and the supernatural. Nevertheless, this paper focuses on two neo-Victorian adaptations of the legend.¹ On the one hand, I will look into Stephen Sondheim's stage musical *Sweeney Todd. The Demon Barber of Fleet Street. A Musical Thriller* (1979), which premiered in Broadway achieving a great critical success and a moderate spectatorship attendance. On the other hand, I will analyse Tim Burton's film adaptation *Sweeney Todd. The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007), a film which invigorated

¹Neo-Victorianism is a currently-expanding cultural phenomenon characterized by a renewed fascination with the nineteenth century, which is fertilizing contemporary literature and cinema, as well as uneven fields such as architecture or fashion.

the legend from its dormant stage in the wake of the phenomenon of neo-Victorianism. Although this selection is only the tip of the iceberg of a long and prolific adaptation history of the legend, it is however a chance to analyse both how violence is portrayed in media and the socio-political traces inherent to the legend.

2. Meat Pies on Broadway: Stephen Sondheim's Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street. A Musical Thriller (1979)

Sondheim's Broadway musical consisted of an adaptation of Christopher Bond's previous play *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979).² Bond's play is remarkable in the sense that it includes a revenge plot: Todd, after years of deportation on a false charge, comes back to take revenge on Judge Turpin, who raped Mrs. Todd and took Johanna, Todd's daughter, as a ward. It is not surprising that Sondheim paid attention to a story about Victorian outcasts since he has always been "attracted to characters . . . who express, among other feelings, a frustration with, or even contempt for, mainstream society" (Lovensheimer 2008: 206).

The opening of the musical is revealing: a huge white curtain hangs in front of the audience, showing a reproduction of George Cruikshank's *The British Beehive* (1867) which displays from top to bottom Queen Victoria as the queen bee and all the classes ending with the working collective (Citron 2001: 247). Suddenly the curtain is violently dropped to reveal an industrial setting and the whole Chorus on stage. The tearing-down of the beehive signals the play's deepest meaning: a challenge to the traditional social structure by means of violent actions. All members of the Chorus wear costumes proper of working classes. A character states that "[Todd] trod a path that few have trod", implying that Todd dares to do what few low class members dare: employing force to collapse the higher classes' hegemony. The Chorus encourages Sweeney in his violent actions, singing "Swing your razor wide, Sweeney! Hold it to the skies!" Chorus' members look constantly at the audience, disturbingly promoting us to celebrate the spill of blood. Not in vain, the Chorus's intervention is re-enacted every time the barber makes a further step in his gyre of violence, singing similar lines as the ones quoted above.

The scenery backcloth shows an industrial harbour, trading ships, factories and smoking chimneys superimposed by metallic frameworks. Stephen Citron reports that "an unused Rhode Island iron foundry [was reconstructed] to resemble the play's mid-Victorian factory setting" (Citron 2001: 245). The theatrical machinery and the skeletons of the metallic footbridges are left bare probably on purpose, which together with the moving iron-stairs and walkways were intended for sure to invoke Industrialism imagery. Metallurgical structures and the shadows projected by them turn the theatrical space in a sort of cage, hinting the oppression to which Victorian individuals were subdued in the mechanical roar of Industrialism. The quick rhythm with which performers move props and sceneries to transport us to different places of Victorian London reflects equally in some way the hasty rhythm of Victorian Industrial Britain.

Among the numerous songs composed for the musical, some are rather remarkable for the analysis of violence in the story. A particularly interesting number is "My friends" in which Todd dedicates a song to his razors. By devoting a musical apostrophe to his deadly

² The original version of the Broadway musical premiered in 1979, with Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury in the leading roles. Nevertheless, for the making of this paper I have used a recorded version of a stage production whilst on tour in Los Angeles in 1982, edited in DVD (2008) and with George Hearn and Angela Lansbury in the leading roles.

sharp weapons Todd elevates violence to the level of art. His rapturous and tender addressing to the razors, to which he often caresses affectionately “as if he were pouring out his heart to a lover” (Kimball 1991: xxxv), suggests his total surrender to violence as the axiom of his behaviour.

A turning point in the play is the episode “Epiphany”, which marks the beginning of the destructive cycle of horror. In this scene Judge Turpin escapes Todd’s razor when Anthony, Todd’s sea-companion, bursts into the shaving parlour. The barber, having lost the chance to avenge his family, goes completely mad as it is suggested in the furious music underscoring him. Todd has just crossed the threshold between sympathetic avenger and hideous murderer, and has expanded his vengeful drives towards the whole humanity, stating boldly that “we all deserve to die.” In the Chorus’ final number, characters transfer Sweeney’s vengeful drives from the stage to the audience, crying “Sweeney!” and pointing alternatively to different places of the theatre-hall. The Chorus hints the possibility of potential ‘Sweeneys’ among all those present spectators by taking the most of theatre-going as a social act and rendering violence as a natural impulse in human behaviour.

Lovett, wonderfully performed by Angela Lansbury, joins happily the horror circus initiated by Todd when she sees the chance to bring fresh air to her business. Their partnership in the manufacture of cannibalistic pies is established in the funniest number of the show, “Have a Little Priest” when the barber and the baker let their imagination run wild in guessing how different collectives would taste if made into pies. The candidates suggested as suitable stuffing for the pastries belong, not surprisingly, to powerful classes: priest, bishop, lawyer, politician, and so on. Todd and Lovett are resolute to challenge the usual position of society in that now “those above will serve those down below!” That is, now it is the turn for lower classes to abuse, squeeze, and exploit the upper classes in their revenge against capitalism. The evils of a society consuming itself in the ferocity of capitalism are reflected in the song “City of Fire” performed by the beggar-woman and Todd’s wife, while she observes the ominous smoke whirling from Lovett’s chimney. The beggar-woman, before being killed by Todd, has time to expose the depravation of an industrial city destroying itself in the fire of its own excesses and consumption, making evident the repulsive gluttony of Lovett’s customers who cry non-stop “More hot pies!”

3. Revitalizing the legend: Tim Burton’s *Sweeney Todd. The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007)

The sadistic resonances of the legend were taken to its most extreme limits by the American director Tim Burton, whose interest in the monstrous side of human nature and in nightmarish/gothic landscapes is exemplified in works such as *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) or *Sleepy Hollow* (1999). His celebrated adaptation of Sondheim’s musical revitalized the legend and brought it to the fore within the neo-Victorian paradigm. Above all, Burton’s stage-screen transposition meant releasing the legend from spatial constrictions in a theatre-building. Burton’s camera accesses every corner of Todd/Lovett’s terrifying industrial building, including the cellar and the sewers. By means of CGI effects, the camera creeps over the tumbledown roofs of Fleet Street, the dirty and rat-infected alleys, and the sooty and foggy atmosphere of Victorian London, rendering a sublimely phantasmagorical view. The sets are claimed to be “influenced by Victorian paintings . . . of William Frith . . . Atkinson Grimshaw and Whistler” (French 2008: no pages).

Screen musicals’ detractors often mention the inherent artificiality of performers bursting into singing. Certainly the artificial stage-space allows the inclusion of certain features which do not operate properly in the realistic territory of cinema. In a search for realism, the figure of the Chorus is dropped on screen. Therefore only characters within the

story sing. Additionally, Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter, performing Todd and Lovett respectively, space out their singing performance from the operatic style adopted in the Broadway musical, employing “hushed, “indoor” voices that blend almost seamlessly with the spoken dialogue” (Patrick 2010: 206), and minimizing the artificiality of musical conventions. Naturalization strategies are perceived also when comparing Bonham Carter’s contained performance and Lansbury’s histrionic Broadway-like acting. A third naturalization mechanism is inserting the performance of a given song within a frame where artifice is allowed. Such technique is used after Judge Turpin escapes Todd’s razor. Todd drives totally mad and his performance of “Epiphany” starts but only in his mind, where breaking into singing is more permissible.

Burton also distances the film from Broadway by cannibalizing traces of melodrama and emphasizing the most brutal aspects of the story. In the original penny-blood and in Sondheim’s play, Anthony and Johanna are reunited in the ending and a happy future is suggested for them. In Burton’s film, however, the lovers are abandoned before the climax and no more is known of them. Johanna’s melodramatic performance of “Green Finch and Linnet Bird” is equally darkened by Burton by showing Judge Turpin spying voyeuristically the young Johanna through a hole in the wall, raising concerns of child abuse in modern spectatorship. Burton is appealing to blood-avid twenty-first century audiences who would not accept readily an over-presence of melodramatic traces.

Todd and Lovett will not hesitate in dynamiting the social order in order to punish capitalist society. Again during the “Have a Little Priest” scene, they carefully select human stuffing for their pies while they prey on the different high classes from behind the window. Their statuses as outsiders allow them to see without being seen and concede them a panoptic power over a hasty society which focuses on economic benefits rather than on the welfare of its members. Todd and Lovett seal their bloody commitment with a grotesque carnival waltz which acts as a portent of the end of their commercial alliance, also marked by a waltz at the end when Lovett is thrown to the scorching oven. The scene “Epiphany” sets the turning point again. After claiming that “we all deserve to die”, he walks the gloomy streets, pointing with his razor alternatively to anonymous men who do not seem to hear him. Todd lifts his razors while rows of citizens walk by unshaken, mimicking assembly lines in the never-ending mechanization of society, of which Todd escapes by adopting a spectral and imperceptible status.

The graphic killings executed by Todd illustrate his lethal absentmindedness in which he vows revenge to the whole society. The artificially blood, unrealistically sprayed from the victims’ necks, seem aimed at reflecting the protagonist’s mental expurgation and revengeful insanity. The bodies falling headfirst through down the hole to the sanguinary cellar epitomize graphically their demotion in the social scale from the upper to the lowest and dirtiest plane. Todd frequently kills his victims while softly singing “Johanna” in lament for her lost daughter. Burton juxtaposes Todd’s roles as a ruthless murderer and loving father, collapsing our preconceived image of a murderer and aestheticising violence. In the end Todd is killed with his own razor by Toby, his apprentice, who simply turns round, and the audience cannot help but expect him to have a ‘successful’ criminal career.

4. Conclusion

The disengagement of fictional violence and actual violence seems to be at the heart of the artistic pervasiveness of the legend of Sweeney Todd. Whereas repulsion or rejection is the only commonsensical response to violence on real life, bloodshed on art enjoys a greater freedom despite critical voices. Artistic brutality is a dexterous enough construct as to be intermingled with social commentary, or even with shockingly opposite concepts such as