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Film Review: Gulliver's Travels

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Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*. Screenplay by Nicholas Stoller and Joe Stillman. Twentieth Century Fox, 2010.

For film critics and most moviegoers, the 2010 production of *Gulliver's Travels*, directed by Rob Letterman and starring Jack Black as Lemuel Gulliver, is now headed for a lingering, probably diminishing existence on DVD after being briefly mocked and lamented during its time in theaters. For people interested in Swift's work or in the eighteenth century, however, *Gulliver's Travels* has a different afterlife as we confront its effects. Film adaptation theorists such as Imelda Whelehan, Deborah Cartmell, and Brian McFarlane have suggested that adaptations are not subordinate to originary texts but rather stand in an "intertextual" relationship with them, each affecting the perception and enhancing the cultural standing of the other. As I have proposed elsewhere, adaptations may increase attention to an original, but the nature of that attention is significant. In the case of this *Gulliver's Travels*, what do people now know or think they know or have had confirmed about Swift's narrative or about history by this film? What was the "cultural capital," to borrow a favorite phrase of intertextual film critics, of Swift's work before and during the film's run, and what is it now? During fall 2010, for example, Fox Television used *Gulliver's Travels* to open episodes of its reality show *Hell's Kitchen*. Each week, audiences watched the contestants as irritating and vaguely menacing Lilliputians force-feeding Chef Gordon Ramsay as Gulliver before the cooking competition began. This unusually large presence in popular media is complicated by the fact that Fox Television is the sister company of Twentieth Century Fox, which released the film. *Gulliver's Travels* thus takes on a life both as a merchandising tool and a product to be placed: a commodity whose value is important to new economic forces and both definable and measurable in new ways. Encompassing all these issues is the matter of our own historical moment,

its nature, and how we construct what came before "now." Although unimpressive even at its best moments, this *Gulliver's Travels* does raise some issues about adaptations and the construction of history worth thinking about.

As an adaptation, the film's connection to the original narrative is primarily indirect. Direct transfers include a main character named Lemuel Gulliver, who travels to the island of Lilliput where he seems big and to another island where he seems small. He extinguishes the palace fire in Lilliput by urinating on it (the film's General Edward Edwardian, called "Edward" throughout the film after he introduces himself, shouts at Gulliver about "evacuating" on the palace, a small borrowing from Swift), and captures the Blefuscian (as it is called in the film) fleet by grabbing their anchor ropes and pulling them to shore. More numerous are elements that have been transposed. The film's General Edward conspires against Gulliver for stealing his glory and credibility at court and for supporting the general's rival for the princess's affections, whereas in the text a cabal including an admiral (goaded to action after Gulliver triumphs over the Blefuscudian navy), a general, and a treasurer (enraged by rumors of his wife's indiscretions with Gulliver) forms to eliminate him. General Edward goes to Blefuscu to get rid of Gulliver; Swift's Gulliver flees to Blefuscu after learning of plans to execute him. In the film, some of Gulliver's possessions wash up on shore (thus providing the General with his plan for a robot), while the original Lilliputians itemize the contents of Gulliver's pockets. And so on. Despite the frequent laments of reviewers (many of whom characterized the "palace fire" scene as an offense against a classic text) that screenwriters Joe Stillman and Nicholas Stoller abandoned Swift's narrative, in fact, attention to Swift's work reveals that the screenwriters have included a larger number of elements than might be thought.

This transposition of pieces from the original narrative does not mean that Swift's ideas came with them, however. In modernizing, that is, "updating" the story—instead of a pocket watch, the Lilliputians discover Gulliver's cell phone and so on—the screenwriters have modified the function of those analogous elements in order to change the function of the overall narrative. They rework Swift's use of the size metaphor, deploying it to deliver a clichéd, upbeat message about self-image, aspiration, and social position. Informed by Dan, the twenty-year-old who becomes Gulliver's superior after one day of working in the mailroom that "you are always going to be small because you think of yourself as small," Gulliver has to learn to see himself as big, first physically and then in terms of heart and character. When the fire in the palace is set by invading Blefuscians attempting a distraction so they can kidnap the princess, Gulliver initially refuses to rescue her, not only accepting orders given him by a man six inches high but also agreeing to remain passive when others are in danger. Gulliver's changing self-image is conventionally punctuated by a false discovery (in this case, of invincibility) during the naval encounter with the Blefuscian armada. It turns out, of course, that he is neither physically nor emotionally invincible, and the isolation of too much ego is as destructive as the isolation of too little ego in which Gulliver began the film. Gulliver's lowest emotional point, when he "feels smallest," comes therefore after ceding the first duel to General Edward and admitting that he has inflated his status and abilities at home. His emotional state is made physical by his mercifully brief sojourn in Brobdingnag. Here he loses control of his physical life as he is subjected by a giant schoolgirl to her domestic fantasies: force-fed a bottle, drinking tea with other toys, wearing a dress, and sexually assaulted by a male doll. Her physical size is naturally a manifestation of an oversized ego: thwarted by Gulliver in her efforts to engineer a tea party, she yanks the head off a stuffed

toy to indicate what she will do to him if he does not comply with her wishes. No tender Glumdalclitch here. His rejection of this situation by returning to Lilliput thus signals his acquisition of a new perspective and appropriate self-esteem. After liberating his full-sized love-interest, Darcy Silverman, and the Lilliputian royal family from a dungeon, Darcy urges him to flee, but he declines. "These little people have grown very large in my heart," he announces in case we have missed the big-little connection, and Black carefully emphasizes "little" and "large" in his delivery. For Swift's Gulliver, being regarded as a prodigiously powerful being increases his self image; he gets a "swelled head." Although he starts the book as a physician struggling to support his family, there is a time in the first voyage when he feels powerful, noble, and attractive, but Swift satirizes this new view of himself. For Stillman and Stoller, however, Gulliver's adoption of this perspective is healthy and therefore praiseworthy: "You work in the mailroom," Darcy tells Gulliver as he is about to go fight General Edward for the second time. "Not today, I don't," he answers, and we are supposed to cheer.

The screenwriters emphasize the virtue of appropriate ego and agency by approvingly subjecting the Lilliputians to the same transformation. The Lilliputians open the film as an entirely defensive and reactive people. Princess Mary stands still while Blefuscians swarm over her balcony and finally announces: "Now I am kidnapped." The motto displayed behind their King's throne is *condo et assero*, "build and defend." Consequently, they are ill-equipped to evaluate newness in the form of Gulliver; their groupthink approach is epitomized by the conditioned unison shout, "All hail, Lilliput!" They uncritically accept everything Gulliver says after he puts out the fire, even when he claims to have drowned in the *Titanic* disaster, and readily dismiss their culture (ways of talking, methods of military review, clothes, and so forth) in favor of Gulliver's. Gulliver's moment of ascendance, when he falsely regards himself as invincible, is matched by the Lilliputians' readily accepting a subordinate position. During this period they willingly become toys, acting as foosball pieces and a Wii game, and their speeches before and after the first duel with General Edward in his Transformer apparatus underscore their dependence on Gulliver. The Lilliputians and Gulliver complete the same transformation by the end: like Gulliver, they have learned to think independently and to take action. They resume their old (and "old") clothes and their group announcements, but these have changed from "All hail, Lilliput!" to "War! What is it good for?" During the second kidnapping attempt, Princess Mary resists her would-be kidnapper and knocks him unconscious with her fist, gleefully and contemptuously shouting "Boosh!" over his prone figure. Her subjects echo, "Boosh!" A happy twenty-first-century ending, indeed.

This message, to think for oneself and thereby achieve one's dreams, seems to frighten the screenwriters, however, as they repeatedly undercut it with exhortations to mediocrity and conformity. The antagonists of the piece are active and ambitious. Dan, the mailroom assistant who becomes head of the mailroom after one day, accurately identifies Gulliver's flaws but then turns mean, telling Gulliver that the latter will always be inadequate and using his new authority to make Gulliver stop playing "Guitar Hero." As Dan is to Gulliver, so the Blefuscians are to the Lilliputians. Their motto is *rapio et abfugio* ("seize and keep away from"). They are focused on kidnapping the princess (first Blefuscian SEALs attempt it, then General Edward, after joining the Blefuscians) and conquering Lilliput, apparently in that order. By the end of the film, however, both Dan and the Blefuscians have been disarmed. Dan has become the former Gulliver: still in the mailroom, training an eager, younger assistant, dressing sloppily, and signaling that his ambitions have

dead-ended, he is sinking in self-image just as Gulliver did before him. For their part, the Blefuscians have given over dreams of conquest and now aspire only to sing and dance with their former enemies. Thus ambition comes to no good end.

At the same time, Gulliver and the Lilliputians do not actually change all that much. It is his best friend, Horatio (Swift, Shakespeare, they're all the same, these great English writers), who convinces Gulliver to return to Lilliput, rather than Gulliver who comes to any realization through self-examination. Upon his return, Gulliver requires no emotional courage. Queen Isabelle does the emotional work for Gulliver by telling Darcy Silverman that Darcy is Gulliver's "one true love," and Darcy immediately responds encouragingly. Also, the Lilliputians renew their support of Gulliver, making it clear that even if he loses his second duel with the Transformer Formerly Known as General Edward, he will still have their love. Their own alteration is fairly shallow. Although they are shouting "Boosh!" by film's end, the Lilliputians are also back to shouting in concert (and for the women, wearing corsets, a sure sign of retrograde motion). As for Gulliver, he acquires a higher place in the office food chain, the chance to travel on someone else's dime, and sex with his boss. His big dream has come true, but what a dream it is. Like *Working Girl* (1988) twenty years earlier, *Gulliver's Travels* contends that the reward of self-actualization, the height of achievement, is to become a happy cog in the corporate machine.

Given these milquetoast notions of individuality and the function of theme in narrative, one could hardly expect the film to be satirical. The concluding scene of the Lilliputians and Blefuscians performing "War" led by Jack Black doing his usual air guitar routine (for at least the third time in the film) is Stillman and Stoller's version of Swift's big endian/little endian conflict. Clearly unaware of the irony, they have set this scene at Blenheim, the Great House built with a fortune made by waging war. Although here the film agrees with Swift's indictment of war, it eschews his additional indictment of human beings for waging it and provides its critique through unsubtle statement, not through satire. The absence of satire is not a fault of the medium—there are plenty of excellent, biting film satires, and some of them are even adaptations—but of these filmmakers pulling their punches. Even the costumes suggest fence-sitting. Although the Lilliputians wear blue and Blefuscians wear red, Gulliver wears a red T-shirt and Darcy a blue blouse, thus avoiding any final designation of good guys and bad guys. The Blefuscians have a Spanish-looking king and naval leader, played respectively by Emmanuel Quatra (French by nationality) and Stewart Scudamore (most often cast as an Arab character); their fleet is called an "armada" and its ships have all the baroque embellishments expected of Spanish galleons. At the same time, the Blefuscians' long military coats and deep, rounded helmets evoke Bismarck's Germany. They are everyone and no one.

Admittedly, seen within the context of a string of adaptations rather than as an independent entity, this version's differences from Swift's original text are just business as usual. The animated *Gulliver's Travels* released in 1939 by Max and Dave Fleischer presented an unflappable, benevolent Gulliver who ended a war between the Kings of Lilliput and Blefuscu over the song to be sung at the wedding of their children. Despite having very few elements of Swift's work, the Fleischer film has proved surprisingly useful to subsequent adaptations. Its romantic subplot appears in *The Three Worlds of Gulliver* (Columbia Pictures, 1960) and the current film. The Fleischers' confident Gulliver reappears in the *Gulliver's Travels* starring Richard Harris in 1977 (Belvision). This version also borrows other elements

from the Fleischer production, such as the scene of the bridge straining under the weight of the wagon carrying the unconscious Gulliver to the capital of Lilliput. The current adaptation converts the Fleischers' Brobdingnagian spies who attack Gulliver with the gun found in his pocket into General Edwards's use of plans for a robot washed up in his shipwreck to attack him. *The Three Worlds of Gulliver*, the 1996 *Gulliver's Travels* (Hallmark Entertainment), and the current *Gulliver's Travels* also provide Gulliver with a love-interest. Only the 1996 version starring Ted Danson attempted to present all four parts of the original narrative; it also offered a Gulliver so shattered by his experiences that, thoroughly unlike the other Gullivers, he struggles to reconstruct his psyche to make sense of himself and his world. At the opposite extreme is Hanna-Barbera's fully animated *The Adventures of Gulliver* (1968), which follows the teenaged Gary Gulliver as he seeks his lost father, helped by his shaggy white dog and the friendly Lilliputians.

Given this film history and the burden of adapting a "classic novel," as reviewers often labeled Swift's original text, Stillman and Stoller's adaptation seems very aware of the relationship between "the past" and "the classic." Gulliver ostentatiously constructs his own past when asked about himself in Lilliput, and he does so by drawing on films such as *Star Wars* and *Titanic*, whose use in this way identifies them as "classic." Gulliver thus positions his individual-oriented, new "classic past" against the socially-oriented, old "classic past" of Lilliput, the one defended (as their motto instructs) by General Edward. Stillman and Stoller also oppose their own cultural moment and film to the original text's cultural moment and media, which they unfairly limit to bells: "You guys have got to get a new means of communication," Gulliver complains when the crisis is so terrible that the Lilliputians are reduced to incoherence, that is, uncontrollably ringing their warning bell.

Unable to make a firm commitment to any stance, however, this *Gulliver's Travels* ultimately settles for an ambivalent relationship between the present and history. The film constructs a past—primarily by what is popularly imagined as the past. It is a pastiche of the Middle Ages (King Theodore, himself in possession of an olde Englishe name, objects to all the -eths in Lilliputian "formal speech") and of the eighteenth century. Other periods of British history also get screen time: Elizabethan England in the "armada" and faithful sidekick Horatio, the Dickensian wardrobe of the requisite adorable waifs playing in Lilliput's streets, and the general's full name, Edward Edwardian. This is The Past, an amalgam of common images of the periods most likely to conform to popular imagination; their helpful purpose is to give Gulliver an opportunity to change. Evidently the past is literally a foreign country, and it enables us to recognize our distinctive nature when we go there. Encountering the past in Lilliput provokes Gulliver to become the person he aspires to be or, better still, the person he could not even imagine being. In reacting against what is different there and then, Gulliver must identify and claim what he wishes to be here and now.

This attitude toward the past is actually the part of the film that makes the most sense as an adaptation of an eighteenth-century text. The eighteenth century also was familiar with the deliberate creation of a past—whether that of an individual, a literary tradition, or of "the English" in order to define who and what England and English people were at that moment. Recently, some scholars have suggested that the proliferation of modernized adaptations signals our inevitable modern disconnect from the past, but this adaptation's appeal to and reaction against the past suggests rather a connection between the eighteenth century and

our own—a connection, furthermore, that might be explicable as a continuation of the modernity we sometimes claim to have moved beyond. The expression of this idea in *Gulliver's Travels* by Stoller and Stillman does not render it either a good movie or a good adaptation; it is neither. But that quality does offer a small redeeming irony with which to consider it.