

## *Gulliver's Travels*: Silly, Silly Stories

**Abstract** This chapter analyzes *Gulliver's Travels* (2010) to demonstrate how twenty-first century adaptors and writers recognize the artificial nature of “history” and ideology’s role in creating it. Starring Jack Black, this adaptation of Jonathan Swift’s novel displays history as a malleable narrative whose impact on the present is direct and profound, and consequently both potentially liberating or potentially destructive. The discussion focuses on several aspects of the film: its use of various forms of history to establish the idea that it is an infinitely renewable narrative; its recognition of the original novel, and cultural texts more broadly, as a culturally valuable historical artefact; and its use of space to create history, including its own narrative of the role of history and text.

**Keywords** Adaptation theory · Film adaptation · *Gulliver's Travels* · Jack Black · Eighteenth-century adaptation

Early in Joe Stillman and Nicholas Stoller’s adaptation of *Gulliver's Travels* (2010), Gulliver (Jack Black) plays with a set of *Star Wars* action figures on a shelf in his apartment. The camera looks through the shelf, centering Gulliver’s large face rising from below the shelf until it looms over the diminutive toys (Fig. 2.1). This sequence suggests that Gulliver is ridiculously, endearingly childlike in his fascination with these figurines as he ventriloquizes them and integrates them into his morning routine. Gulliver’s toys—toys from the cultural past, from an obviously fictional



Fig. 2.1 Gulliver playing with action figures



Fig. 2.2 Gulliver watching the Lilliputians

narrative—display Gulliver’s character and present life. The camera establishes the size disparity that will reappear in the Lilliput scenes, narratively foreshadowing those events and thematically introducing the problem of Gulliver’s fascination with artifacts of the past. Later, Gulliver will do the same thing with the Lilliputians that he does in the early scene with the action figures: he uses them as playthings but also as objects that define his identity. The camera will reproduce this scene, only with Lilliputians performing an exchange between some of the same *Star Wars* characters that appeared earlier (Fig. 2.2). They seem to have no more will than the action figures—they too do Gulliver’s

bidding—and like the action figures, they are used to establish Gulliver's identity. For the film's audience, the Lilliputians are the equivalent of action figures in another way as well: they are signifiers of a significant cultural product and tools for creating history.<sup>1</sup>

Stillman and Stoller's screenplay exhibits considerable anxiety about the role of artistic artifacts in constituting history, whether it is the history of a society or the history of an individual. Gulliver's interactions with the Lilliputians, and to a far lesser extent with the one Brobdingagian, are powerfully formative. At the end of the film, Gulliver has transformed from a childlike, insecure, dishonest coward to a confident, mature actor. The closing shot takes in two framed newspaper pages, the far one with Darcy's byline "Out and About" and the near one with both hers and Gulliver's, "Gulliver's Travels," connecting Gulliver's successful present with his brief time in Lilliput. In this regard, the film seems to be remarking positively on the power of objects from the past to create an identity for the present moment and the present individual. And yet, the film repeatedly requires Gulliver to put aside these artifacts and associates Gulliver's fascination with them as a refusal to "grow up," to become an adult who acts, and acts with integrity and concern for others. Gulliver's romance and career depend on encountering the Lilliputians and the *Star Wars* action figures, but they also depend on making the Lilliputians and the *Star Wars* toys into history. Lilliputians, *Star Wars* figurines, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* all simultaneously are positive because they are formative and negative because they are formative.

Stillman and Stoller's adaptation of *Gulliver's Travels* offers a case study of the phenomenon that this book addresses: the representation of the eighteenth century to devise an explanation for and justification of aspects of contemporary Anglo-American life and ideology. Stillman and Stoller's film adaptation ostentatiously depends on the recognition that "history" is a narrative about the past and as such, is not just constructed but also fungible. At the same time that the film celebrates the possibilities of such a notion of history, *Gulliver's Travels* also demonstrates the anxiety that such a concept generates, particularly an anxiety about the role of influence, both of the previous, constructed moment and of the elements used to construct that narrative of the previous moment. As such, *Gulliver's Travels* celebrates and worries about the power of the arts in creating history.

This *Gulliver's Travels* is overtly and obviously an adaptation, although not a particularly faithful one. Early forms of adaptation theory would

find this infidelity to the source troubling, not only because of the differences between the film and original narrative but also because Stillman and Stoller's adaptation does not seem to genuflect to the original. Pure fidelity criticism has become untenable in the wake of postmodern and theoretical critiques by scholars including Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, Brian MacFarlane, Claire Monk, Charlotte Brunsdon, Laurence Raw, Thomas Leitch, Christine Geraghty, and Linda Hutcheon. These approaches take an intertextual view of adaptation, acknowledging how adaptations interact with the original and their context but are not lesser for following an original. Intertextuality is not an exchange but a "mosaic," a confluence of texts and contexts.<sup>2</sup> When the start text appears in the adaptation as part of this mosaic, its appearance is a "palimpsest." Although it is not necessary to recognize the palimpsest or to be familiar with the source text to appreciate or get meaning from an adaptation, as Linda Hutcheon points out, adaptations are "haunted at all times by their adapted texts" so that when we know a prior text well, "we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly."<sup>3</sup> Such an egalitarian relationship has a powerful impact on the understanding and cultural capital of both texts.<sup>4</sup> Because birth order, so to speak, does not create hierarchy, the texts can stand on their own as objects with their own value even as they are also in a dynamic. In terms of Stillman and Stoller's *Gulliver's Travels*, this formulation means that while Swift's narrative "haunts" the film, both texts also can be understood as objects with equal integrity (even if that integrity doesn't guarantee equal artistic or intellectual heft).

This understanding of adaptations has implications for context as well as text. Film and television adaptations of texts from the past (*Howard's End*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and so forth), like nonadaptation films set in a historical moment (*Downton Abbey*, *Shakespeare in Love*, *Restoration*, and the like), construct a history for their audience. "The past" is not the same as "history": the former is the period in which events took place, the latter is the story that one tells about the past, and history reflects the ideology of the teller. In creating a history, the present moment provides an understanding of past events. It also constructs a concept of and an explanation for itself as the product or end result of that history. "The present" is therefore a narrative in the way that "history" is a narrative, and to construct the latter is to create the former.

This connection between representing the past and creating a present is crucial to understanding adaptation, of course. At the simplest

level, an adaptation interacts with a source text to create a cultural present (e.g., "We are a culture that values *Gulliver's Travels*"). Adaptation also constructs that text's historical context.<sup>5</sup> In the case of *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, Stillman and Stoller's adaptation of Swift's narrative confers value on the source text and shapes the understanding of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* because of the dynamic between adapted and adaptation. In addition, by choosing a text from the eighteenth century, Stillman and Stoller confer value on the eighteenth century: it is a period with value because it produced *Gulliver's Travels*. Marcia Landy calls this kind of relationship "investments in the past."<sup>6</sup> Adaptations influence the present cultural moment through their effect on the interpretation and cultural standing of the source text and, by extension, through a construction of the source text's original cultural moment. As Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter point out, such adaptations are all about causation.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when an adaptation represents the historical moment in which the original text was composed, that adaptation strengthens claims of causality between source moment and present moment. This kind of adaptation does more than assert that We came from Then, "Then" being a time with value. It also posits by implication that "Then" has allowed us to become who we are, in part because it gave us good things like *Gulliver's Travels* and in part because "Then" was the context that created *Gulliver's Travels*. When it comes to a historical period, whether as part of the adaptation of a "historical" text or as part of a new production, the representation of that period is itself a text, a point that post-modern critics of heritage film often make.<sup>8</sup> The representation of the period is also a text within a still larger text: the narrative of history that a society creates for and about itself at any given moment. What history is made and what is used to make that history become the causes, the explanations, and the justifications of the present moment. We choose to be who we choose to make ourselves retrospectively and retroactively.

Stillman and Stoller's adaptation of *Gulliver's Travels* engages on several levels with the idea that history is what we narrate it to be. The film presents personal history and national history as a flexible narrative whose impact on the present is direct and profound, and both potentially liberating or potentially destructive. But while the film celebrates history's plasticity, the film is suspicious of—if not ambivalent about—the artifacts used to construct history. Comfortable with the "new" and the way that the present can always be reconstructed depending on the materials used to construct what came before, Stillman and Stoller's

*Gulliver's Travels* is also uncomfortable with the consistent value placed on certain objects, and the lingering role that those objects consequently play in the construction of history and the present. The action figures in the early sequence in the film signal Gulliver's difficulty moving out of the past—his personal past in the form of childhood and his cultural past in the form of *Star Wars*—but they also signal the power of the objects themselves and the need for critical (or preferably changeable) evaluation. *Gulliver's Travels* is therefore the opening chapter in this study for several reasons. The film exemplifies the view that history is made by the stories told from objects and artifacts from the past, a view that underpins the films and television programs analyzed in the other chapters. It exposes the anxiety about present, past, and history that underlies these representations of the eighteenth century and drives their use. It demonstrates techniques used by popular film and television programs to create history. And it investigates the ideology served by that history.

So what then of the film? In Stillman and Stoller's hands, Jonathan Swift's satire becomes the story of Lemuel Gulliver, a mailroom clerk at a large New York newspaper who lies to the travel editor, Darcy Silverman, about being a travel writer, gets an assignment to the Bermuda Triangle, and winds up on Lilliput. There he defeats the invading Blefuscians,<sup>9</sup> becomes the hero of Lilliput, is unmasked as a fraud when he fails to repel the next Blefuscian invasion, and is exiled to Brobdingnag. Rescued by his Lilliputian friend Horatio, Gulliver liberates the Lilliputians, ends the war, and returns to New York to assume a career at the newspaper as a travel writer and as the boyfriend of his editor, Darcy Silverman, whom he also has rescued after she followed him to the Bermuda Triangle and was captured in Lilliput by Blefuscian troops.

At its simplest, the film represents history as a shifting amalgam of objects and their associations, not unlike Renaissance wonder-cabinets or J.K. Rowling's Room of Requirement at Hogwarts. These are collections "designed to be pleasing sights, such that they avoid the potentially deadening effects of order, and use juxtaposition to stimulate the viewer to make connections—even those of a random or unpredictable nature," as Sophie Thomas explains.<sup>10</sup> For example, *Gulliver's Travels* collapses all islands with a colonial history into one locale. Although Gulliver goes to Bermuda, his guide has a Jamaican accent and the soundtrack during this part of the film is Reggae. Materially, Lilliput itself is a catchall of artifacts from the Anglo-American past: eighteenth-century English architecture, late eighteenth-century clothing, nineteenth-century children in

the street. "These are things on holiday, randomly juxtaposed and displaced from any proper context; the room they inhabit acts as a liberty or sanctuary for ambiguous things," in Stephen Mullaney's words.<sup>11</sup> Other cultural elements also "flaunt[...] a manic historical insouciance."<sup>12</sup> The words of Lilliput's official language end in -eth; the villainous general's name is Edward Edwardian.

The wonder-cabinet approach is not limited to Lilliput. The Blefuscians use nineteenth-century diving gear, sail ships from Golden Age Spain, and wear uniforms from Bismarck's Germany. The Brobingnagian dollhouse has furniture from the 1970s, a dead astronaut from the 1960s, and for a time, Gulliver, a representative of the twenty-first century. The film collapses time and space into one display, into one narrative. In collections, as Susan Stewart notes, "all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection's world."<sup>13</sup> Unlike a museum, which imposes connections on its assortment of objects, a place like Lilliput presents those objects as discrete; "alien yet recognized as such," Mullaney writes, "and so granted temporary license to remain without 'authentic place' ... in the cultural and ideological topography of the times."<sup>14</sup>

Thus for Stillman and Stoller, history is a grab bag, a jumbled collection of objects, beliefs, and cultural practices that can be assembled in any way that proves useful to a society or to an individual. For this adaptation of *Gulliver's Travels*, personal history is also a flexible narrative comprised of a variety of recognizable components. Gulliver's life story proves malleable but influential, profoundly shaping his present and the future with which the film ends. Gulliver uses tales of what he has accomplished—what General Edward calls "silly, silly stories"—to invent himself. He fabricates his first personal narrative when he tells Darcy Silverman that he travels and writes travel pieces. Plagiarizing from others' writing, he creates a false portfolio that seems to document a life of travel and independent thought, not to mention a fine career in the making. "Wow," exclaims Darcy, reading his stolen articles. "I am so impressed, Gulliver. I had no idea that you're such a good writer." Another bout of self-fashioning occurs when he invents himself as "President the Awesome" of Manhattan for the Lilliputians. Having rescued the Princess from an attempted kidnapping by the Blefuscians, Gulliver is described by the admiring court as "honorable and courageous" and "noble and awesome." Gulliver builds on the narrative created by his audience's questions and expectations by lying and plagiarizing as he did before, this time stealing from blockbuster films



including *Titanic* (James Cameron's film about the event), the *Star Wars* series, *X-Men*, *Avatar*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *24*. In both cases, the fabrication of a personal history serves to advance Gulliver whether in his career, his self-esteem, or his social standing.

In this regard, the film might seem to have taken this spirit and amalgamating technique from Swift's narrative. Personal history for Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the story that Gulliver tells about his past culminating in an explanation of who he is by the end of the fourth voyage, is also unstable. It is a collection of genres (travel narrative, autobiography, picaresque, and so forth). Gulliver's character is unreliable. His perceptions cannot be trusted. In Lilliput, some things are too small or subtle for him to see. Looking over the entire countryside around the capital of Lilliput, with its tilled fields and crops, Gulliver remarks that it "appeared like a continued Garden, and the enclosed Fields, which were generally forty Foot square, resembled so many Beds of Flowers."<sup>15</sup> Desperate to impress the King of Brobdingnag, he describes England with a "more favourable turn by many Degrees than the strictness of Truth would allow" (Swift, 111). The Gulliver who appears in the first voyage lacks the rabid misanthropy of the Gulliver who appears in the fourth. Whatever Gulliver's past, his history is clearly and inevitably manufactured by his author; there is no "real" Gulliver. The same problem attends the film's Lemuel Gulliver. Gulliver's fictional narrative of his life achieves the opposite effect that he was aiming for: instead of establishing himself firmly as extraordinary, he renders himself no one, an unstable jumble of anecdotes and episodes whose emptiness is obvious to the film's audience and becomes obvious to the Lilliputians. At this point, however, Stillman and Stoller's treatment of personal history significantly diverges from Swift's. Once Stillman and Stoller's Gulliver eschews narrative for action as the foundation of his selfhood, he can succeed. Furthermore, the future he succeeds to is certainly rosy: he is a respected authority on transient experience, i.e., a travel writer, and he is romantically involved with Darcy. Everything in his current life depends on decisive action, whether it is traveling or inviting someone to lunch.

Stillman and Stoller use Gulliver's audiences to underscore the danger of personal history made with narratives about and from the past. His auditors are complicit, readily accepting Gulliver's fictional self-narratives.



Presented first with Gulliver's carefully nonchalant stories of his travels and writing, and then with the supposed records of his adventures, Darcy immediately hands Gulliver an assignment to write a story on the newspaper's expense account. In Lilliput, Gulliver's increasingly extravagant narratives are instantly accepted by the Lilliputians, even when General Edwardian points out that they are logically impossible:

- Edward: Wait, wait! I'm sorry. You mean to say that you actually died in this shipwreck.  
 Gulliver: Yeah, I died.  
 Edward: That's what you're telling us. That you actually died.  
 Gulliver: And I was resuscitated.  
 Edward: It's preposterous.  
 Gulliver: But then I survived.  
 Edward: It's ridiculous.

General Edwardian is alone, however. Watching the supposedly autobiographical play that Gulliver has staged, the royal family recognizes its problems:

- Queen: This is an impossibility!  
 Princess: Yet somehow it seems completely credible.  
 King: Gulliver, you truly have lived a thousand lives.

Unlike General Edwardian, however, they refuse to think critically about the text or about Gulliver. Gulliver's history is what he says it is.

The Lilliputians' credulity is an amusing national trait, but it is also another assertion of the danger of historical narratives. The Lilliputian culture that Gulliver encounters is hedged round with an unchanging set of stories about who they are and how they must be. When King Theodore and General Edwardian argue about Gulliver's trustworthiness, the King turns it into a rejection of tradition:

- Edward: Noble and valiant King Theodore. I trusteth not this beast, Gulliver, who liveth in our midsteth. He can now leave but he chooses to stay. Furthermore, I do not believeth he is it.  
 King: I most humbly disagree-eth. And furthermoreth, why must we always go on with these -eths?  
 Edward: Because we speak officially-eth.

- King: Forget it. From now on, even when speaking officially, we must get rid of these eths.
- Edward: Official speaking is an illustrious Lilliputian tradition.
- King: Whoa! Inside castle voice.

Elsewhere, the Princess rejects traditional Lilliputian courtship rituals (“Courtship manual section 4.2,” as General Edwardian puts it) and embraces a new form of wooing (Horatio’s spontaneous speeches and song). History has value as entertainment and as an inevitable but problematic means for understanding current identity or shaping future character or actions.

Given the film’s attitude toward history and especially toward narratives about and from the past, it is not surprising that the film reveals an ambivalent attitude toward its own identity as an adaptation. The screenplay is selective about what episodes from the original narrative appear in the film and what episodes it reinterprets. There are a few palimpsests from cinematic predecessors, as well. Gulliver’s love interest originally appeared in *The Three Worlds of Gulliver* (1960) and appeared again in the televised four-book version *Gulliver’s Travels* (1996). A pair of star-crossed Lilliputian lovers was introduced in Max and Dave Fleischer’s 1939 animated *Gulliver’s Travels* and recycled in *The Three Worlds of Gulliver*.

At the same time, the film’s adaptations of other texts, particularly of “classic” texts, suggests an awareness of the power of these cultural artifacts.<sup>16</sup> In Christine Geraghty’s words, this use of a canonical text “offers a sense of being engaged with the reassuring durability of a classic: this story is already known and has been proved to work.”<sup>17</sup> These texts themselves also become palimpsests: they are not required for understanding the film on some levels, but they offer another perspective of the film and of the source text when they are recognized. Stillman and Stoller’s adaptations of these texts gather cultural value onto their film by connecting it with culturally prized artifacts. Landy notes that “Considerations of value are inseparable from questions of representation, since lurking in reductive economic considerations are the broader questions of how value is constituted and of what role it plays in commodifying and circulating knowledge.”<sup>18</sup> This equation also goes the other way: reductive economic considerations also lurk within questions of how value is constituted and of what role it plays in commodifying and circulating knowledge. Few as the film’s direct borrowings are, *Gulliver’s Travels* nevertheless anchors itself in culturally valued work, in a “classic” literary

tradition, through its title and through scenes in the film: for example, Gulliver is tied down by tiny ropes even in his hair and is carried to the capital city on a tremendous flatbed cart, urinates on the palace fire to put it out, and seizes the Blefusudian navy by its anchor ropes after they fire on him. These episodes get star treatment and serve as highlights of the film *qua* film, since they emphasize the technological and cinematic elements at work. They are also places, however, where the film deliberately identifies itself as an adaptation of Swift's narrative, associating itself with a canonical text.<sup>19</sup>

Adaptation is never value-free, of course, and neither is the use of culturally prized works of art, whether canonical literature or pop music. Stillman and Stoller revise the balcony scene from Edmond Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac* so the Lilliputian Horatio, prompted by Gulliver hiding behind the palace, woos Princess Mary with the lyrics to Prince's "Kiss" as she stands above him on a balcony. Edmond Rostand's original scene is sharply critical: Cyrano and Christian can deceive Roxanne by exploiting her thoroughly conventional ideas about love, which leads to tragedy. In contrast, Stillman and Stoller's scene endorses conventional romance. They preface the *Cyrano* part of the scene with passages from *Romeo and Juliet*, also a tragic tale of thwarted lovers pop-culturally perceived as a great love story. They render the interactions comic, eliminating the pathos from *Cyrano's* balcony scene, and conclude this subplot with the conventional ending of a romance (Princess Mary and Horatio end up together), presented as happy and satisfying. Rostand's play is useful for its pedigree and its conceit, both of which Stillman and Stoller employ to endorse heteronormativity and patriarchal notions of love, hardly a radical or even critical perspective.

The soundtrack does similar work. When Gulliver feeds Horatio the lyrics to "Kiss" so the latter can woo the Princess, Stillman and Stoller convert "Kiss" from erotic to romantic. Employed to express Horatio's awkwardness, naïveté, and wholesome love for Princess Mary, the song's sexually confident invitation transforms into something comically grotesque, a change that is underscored when the camera focuses on both Jason Segel as Horatio and Jack Black as Gulliver air-kissing along with the lyrics. Prince's invitation to a potential lover becomes ridiculous, making ridiculous in turn the possibility that this singer could do what the lyrics say to, for, or with the princess. Eliminating sexual desire as a component of the Princess Mary–Horatio relationship, the film contains and sanitizes the emotion and the relationship. Positive romantic

relationships are not erotic, happy endings mean the affirmation of heterosexuality.

The song “War” also loses its edge and its function as protest when it becomes a song-and-dance number at the end of the film. With its dance corps in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century clothes and the juxtaposition of enormous, hammy Jack Black against the tiny Lilliputians, the scene and song take on comic flavor. Like “Kiss,” “War” is a bold intervention in cultural mores and practices. Made to oppose the Vietnam Conflict but arguably applicable to any military action, the song originally took a direct anti-war and anti-government stance that was not as obvious or as normative as this *Gulliver’s Travels* posits. The lyrics are hard to mistake: “War! Huh! What is it good for?/Absolutely nothing!” Like “Kiss,” however, “War” loses its teeth with the visual comedy and its application to distant, dissimilar societies rather than to the twenty-first century West. Both songs help delineate the film’s ideological position, a position very different from the positions that they articulate in the recordings that are used in the film.

Furthermore, although the recordings of these songs involve a powerful, challenging black male voice and presence, they function in the film to emphasize conventionalized white male performance. The soundtrack plays the iconic recordings of these songs—Prince and Edwin Starr, respectively—but the person mouthing the words, dancing to the music, and visible on screen is Jack Black, or Black and Jason Segel. “Kiss” is not just an assertively sexual song. Prince’s performance is a performance of confident, black male sexuality. Although the lyrics remain in the film, the performance changes to an awkward white male. The black male voice is used to establish the white male presence. The same thing happens with “War.” Edwin Starr’s definitive recording offers a black male voice raised in direct opposition to the government in the Vietnam Era. Both racially and politically, this recording was a counterforce to socio-political norms in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the film, however, both songs are used as a comedic platform for Jack Black to exercise his trademark dance moves and affinity with rock and roll. In this regard, the implicit or not-so-implicit force of the recordings and their cultural memory as assertions of black male power are redirected into an assertion of white male power in terms of prowess with women, with music, or in battle.<sup>20</sup> In both cases Stillman and Stoller’s film invokes powerful, provocative music but does so to affirm mainstream, sexually and racially limiting values.

The final battle with General Edwardian in the body of a giant robot exemplifies another way in which the eighteenth century and its artifacts—here, Swift's emphatically pacifist narrative—is used to affirm twenty-first century ideology. In this case, it is the premium on violence as entertaining spectacle. Swift deplored the use of violence as popular spectacle in his own time. Gulliver's description of a beheading in Brobdingnag is meant to disgust and horrify: "The Malefactor was fixed in a Chair upon a Scaffold erected for the purpose, and his Head cut off at a blow with a Sword of about forty Foot long. The Veins and Arteries spouted up such a prodigious quantity of Blood, and so high in the Air, that the great *Jett d'eau* at *Versailles* was not equal for the time it lasted; and the Head when it fell on the Scaffold Floor, gave such a bounce, as made me start, although I were at least half an *English* Mile distant."<sup>21</sup> Such scenes are part of a larger indictment of violence in general. In response to Gulliver's appalling, detailed description of what guns and artillery can do, the King "was struck with Horror" by Gulliver's "inhuman Ideas" and concludes that "some evil Genius, Enemy to Mankind, must have been the first Contriver" (Swift, 112). In the first voyage, one of the reasons that Gulliver is branded a traitor is his refusal to destroy the Blefuscudian fleet. Swift argues that war is caused by pettiness and that the normalization of violence dehumanizes everyone.

With the final dance number and the advent of peace between the nations, Stillman and Stoller might be said to agree with Swift or, for fidelity critics, might be said to be faithful to Swift's meaning. But *Gulliver's Travels* uses these overt claims and demonstrations, its associations with Swift's famously anti-war narrative, as cover for a standard use of violence as entertainment. Director Rob Letterman uses the 3-D format for effects such as Jack Black getting shot with cannon balls, showing the scene in slow motion to protract it. General Edwardian's Big Red Robot is one of the most ostentatious elements the film uses to tout technology. First, there is the mash-up of allusions to popular culture. Originally appearing on screen as a version of R2D2 that is half Gulliver's size, the robot quickly reshapes itself à la the Transformers into a humanoid that is considerably larger and more powerful than Gulliver. The second duel between Gulliver and the Edward-bot shows the combatants using the moves and choreography of pro wrestling, a popular, stylized staging of violence. Furthermore, scenes of the robot battering Gulliver are occasionally cut with scenes of General Edwardian inside the robot maneuvering it, reiterations of the way that technology empowers

the human, and Gulliver is only able to win when Horatio unplugs the robot from inside. Stillman and Stoller's dialogue collapses the difference between cinematic, impossible violence and quotidian, possible violence, when Gulliver announces happily at the end of the second duel, "Now that is a wedgie!" To Darcy he then says, "Did you see that? I wedgied him back to the second grade!" In other words, a duel to the death with a giant robot with electrified hands is equivalent to a second grader giving a classmate a wedgie.

As the general-cum-robot suggests, another way that Stillman and Stoller's adaptation uses the source text and the ideas of its context and of history to establish or justify elements of twenty-first century life and ideology is through their treatment of technology. At its shallowest, the film provides an explanation for the Lilliputians' ability to pin down and transport Gulliver that is not offered by Swift's narrative: "We're the finest builders in all the land," King Theodore says proudly to Gulliver, "We can build you anything. Seriously. We're ridiculously good builders." And indeed, the Lilliputians build Gulliver a stunning cliff-top home in no time at all without the help of electricity. The film lingers on their engineering feats such as the mechanical suit General Edwardian forces Gulliver into for plowing and the flatbed cart used to carry Gulliver to Lilliput and winch him upright to meet the King. But Stillman and Stoller also take care to emphasize how otherwise technologically backward the Lilliputians are. They fight with cannon, sail the seas in galleons, and communicate with tower bells. As Gulliver complains early in the film, "You guys got to invest in a more efficient warning system." Gulliver's coffee maker in Lilliput is powered by steam and manpower. Ridiculously good builders they may be, but the film simultaneously renders their achievements quaint.

This quaintness is used as a foil for a celebration of twenty-first century technology. Gulliver's technology—his iPhone, billboard advertisements, foosball game, and robotics magazine, for example—is the ostentatious object of approval. Gulliver can use the Lilliputians' manual labor to replace the conveniences of electrical devices such as a coffee maker and an Xbox, replacements played for laughs, but he does so during the period in the film in which he is deceiving the Lilliputians, indulging his ego, and living in dishonest comfort. The film acknowledges that it may be funny to degrade humans to the role of toys but it's not quite nice. In contrast, electricity requires no physical injury or even effort—unlike his coffee maker in Lilliput, Gulliver's coffee maker

in New York needs only a plug, not a person. Electricity and the technology that it drives thus eliminate the exploitation of human labor without eliminating individual comfort.

Technology is also what allows the transformation of the Lilliputians' main square into a replica of Times Square, a place that the film uses as a touchstone of a positive present. The actual Times Square appears during the opening credits accompanied by a lively, upbeat soundtrack. This location marks the apogee of success for Gulliver. When he is at the height of his popularity in Lilliput, he remakes the capital into Times Square by encasing it in electric billboards and uses his iPod to host a music festival. Street vendors hawk T-shirts of Gulliver to hurrying, Runyonesque crowds. At the end of the film, Gulliver's success is signified by a literal return to Times Square with its crosswalk signals, streetlights, digital and electric billboards, and corporate work.

Times Square signals more than unmediated technology: it is the iconic site of commercialism. As Mary Favret points out about another adaptation, Emma Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), the film version of *Gulliver's Travels* promotes voyeurism and "avid consumerism"; or as Andrew Osmond observes, "western cultural imperialism [is] on display so crassly" in *Gulliver's Travels*.<sup>22</sup> Gulliver's transformation of the Lilliputian town center is comic because it is so hubristic—every billboard has a product whose name and image have been altered to include Gulliver's name, initials, or face. *Avatar*, for example, becomes *Gavatar* and the famous waif from posters for the musical *Les Misérables* now bears Gulliver's face. What bothers General Edwardian about the transformation is the loss of Olde Lilliput and the ascent of Gulliver or "The Beast" as the General prefers to call him. What isn't problematic for the film is the commodification of Gulliver—after all, he instigates it—or the covering of Georgian architecture with advertisements.

Similarly, Gulliver's career success has everything to do with embracing the corporate ladder. As Gulliver assures the new mailroom guy at the end of the film, "Remember, there's no small jobs, just small people," an assertion that certainly avoids if not denies the realities of the working world and the distribution of wealth through wages. Gulliver, however, testifies to the positive power of corporate thinking. He moves from the mailroom to the writing staff, he goes from trying to be unseen and unheard to having his own byline in the travel section that names him ("Gulliver's Travels," of course), and he dates his editor, thus avoiding having to be entirely her subordinate.



In this light, it's worth considering the character of General Edward Edwardian in his role as antagonist to Gulliver and everything that he and the film value. General Edwardian is the only Lilliputian who doesn't fall for Gulliver's hype. It is he who recognizes the impossibility of Gulliver's personal narrative as it is staged for the Lilliputian populace: "It's just silly, silly stories," he points out, a position that the film also maintains. After all, suspicion of history and the recognition of its narrativity and flexibility underpin the film. General Edwardian is also correct when he protests Gulliver's appointment to supreme commander of the Lilliputian military by pointing out quite accurately that Gulliver has no military experience or knowledge, a point made again by Horatio just before they are surprised by another Blefuscian invasion. The General is also outraged by the transformation of the center of the capital into Times Square, a site for the promotion and commodification of Gulliver, an event marking the height of Gulliver's hubris and duplicity. As Christopher Lim observed, "the villainous General Edwards...is unexpectedly easy to sympathise with."<sup>23</sup>

And yet General Edwardian is unquestionably the villain of the piece. Like Dan, who mauled Gulliver's ego and vaulted over him on the corporate ladder at the start of the film, General Edwardian becomes increasingly disheveled as Gulliver rises. His appearance (and Dan's) signals the dissolution of a restrictive order that he embraces and in this respect, literally embodies. General Edward is the keeper of tradition, in fact, the one person in Lilliput who seeks to preserve rituals and systems that have defined and stabilized Lilliputian society and the Lilliputian state for centuries ("We have not missed a military exercise in over 300 years," he tells the King) and this role is in and of itself villainous in the value system of the film. Part of the system that he insists on preserving is ridiculous, such as the official speech in which everything ends in -eth. But some of what he insists on preserving is misogynist. He invades the Princess's chambers whenever he wishes, patronizes her when she wants to talk about their relationship or Gulliver, and indicates that what he loves about her is her cleavage ("Inappropriate," the Princess snaps when he outlines her curves in the air). He is incapable of thinking of her as a person. He has the same intransigence about Gulliver's humanity. He calls Gulliver "Beast" even when Gulliver asks him to use "Gulliver" and initially treats Gulliver as a farm animal. His sins are encapsulated in his furious complaint that "I can't be expected to take orders from a gargantuan fool. I would rather take orders from a woman," a line

immediately followed by his committing treason. General Edwardian is further evidence that static history is repressive and that the artifacts used to construct history—courtship manuals, canonical novels, and so forth—can be dangerous.

That's not to say that the film is all that feminist or racially egalitarian. Women in authority like the Queen, the Princess, and Darcy are contained within heteronormative relationships. The Queen's one big scene, at the feast, reveals her to be lascivious and bibulous. Princess Mary and Darcy are stripped of their social and economic power—the Princess as a princess and Darcy as Gulliver's editor—by raising up the men who would otherwise be their subordinates. Particularly for Gulliver, the film uses chivalry to denude Darcy of her power: she gets seasick and needs Gulliver to help her, she gets captured and needs Gulliver to spring her from jail, she stands by as Gulliver duels General Edwardian, and at the end she revels in Gulliver's calling her his "princess" and taking her to lunch. The one irrefutably powerful female, the Brobdingnagian girl into whose doll house Gulliver is carried, is nonverbal, willful, and violent. She tries to force Gulliver into performing a stereotypical housewife from the American 1950s and uses a doll to sexually assault Gulliver when he won't. Thanks to the association of misogyny with an antediluvian cultural past through the character of General Edwardian, however, the gender politics of the present moment and of the film are made to appear egalitarian and enlightened.

*Gulliver's Travels* thus is adapted to affirm limited contemporary values: success means becoming a corporate cog; technology is liberating; war is bad but individuals fighting each other is good entertainment; women in authority are acceptable as long as they are also sexy and use their authority to elevate men; and so on. These are really just contemporary Western capitalism's favorite narratives, erasing the violence, heartlessness, and exploitation targeted by Swift.

Stillman and Stoller draw on a concept of history that views the latter as fungible: history is not just written by the victors, it is written by anyone at any time, using whatever materials seem appropriate. Those materials are thus simultaneously terribly important for creating a sense of the past and terribly flexible, unreliable, and perilous to employ. History itself is simultaneously terribly important and terribly unstable, whether it actually gives the present something (*Gulliver's Travels* 1727) or is used to understand the present as the legacy of the past (*Gulliver's Travels* 2010).

## NOTES

1. *Gulliver's Travels*, adapted by Joe Stillman and Nicholas Stoller from the novel by Jonathan Swift (2010; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD. All further references to *Gulliver's Travels* will be to this text unless otherwise indicated (*Gulliver's Travels* 2010).
2. The term "mosaic" for this concept appears in Gordon E. Slethaug, *Adaptation Theory and Criticism: Postmodern Literature and Cinema in the USA* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5 (Slethaug 2014).
3. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6 (Hutcheon 2006).
4. The popular use of "cultural capital" often equates the term with "cultural cachet," but Pierre Bourdieu formulated "cultural capital" as the fusion of a linguistic value and a social value that is signaled by how a text is treated by systems and institutions of dissemination and propagation, such as the university and print culture. It is not simply a matter of "how much" cultural capital a text possesses or is assigned, but "what kind" of cultural capital: as John Guillory puts it, "the canonical form in its social and institutional contexts." Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), ix, xiii, original emphasis (Bourdieu 1984; Guillory 1993).
5. Some adaptation theorists have expanded the idea of adaptation to include other adaptations of a source text as well, such as other film versions of *Gulliver's Travels*. As Christine Geraghty explains, "[T]hrough the fact of [an adaptation] being a new version, a version made for a contemporary audience, it promises changes and transformation not only of the original source but also of the screen adaptations that have preceded it." Christine Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 15 (Geraghty 2008).
6. Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1 (Landy 1996).
7. Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter, "Introduction: Retrovisions: Historical Makeovers in Film and Literature," in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, ed. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, and Imelda Whelehan (London: Sterling Press, 2001), 1 (Cartmell and Hunter 2001).
8. For a comprehensive overview of the debate, see for example Claire Monk, "The British 'heritage film' and its critics," *Critical Survey* 7,

- no. 2 (1995): 116–124, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41555905>; Claire Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), PDF e-book or Kamilla Elliott, “Rethinking Formal-Cultural and Textual-Contextual Divides in Adaptation Studies,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2014): 576–593 (Monk 1995, 2011; Elliott 2014).
9. Stillman and Stoller change Swift’s “Blefusculians” to “Blefuscians.” The former term will be used to indicate the people in Swift’s narrative and the latter term will be used for the people in this film.
  10. Sophie Thomas, “‘Things on Holiday’: Collections, Museums, and the Poetics of Unruliness,” *European Romantic Review* 20, no. 2 (April 2009): 169. For a discussion of collecting and miscellanies in England, see for example Barbara M. Benedict, “Collecting Trouble: Sir Hans Sloane’s Literary Reputation in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 111–142; Stacey Sloboda, “Displaying Materials: Porcelain and Natural History in the Duchess of Portland’s Museum,” *ECS* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 455–472 (Thomas 2009; Benedict 2012; Sloboda 2010).
  11. Stephen Mullaney, “Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs; The Rehearsal of Cultures in the Late Renaissance,” *Representations* No. 3 (Summer 1983): 42 (Mullaney 1983).
  12. Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich, “Introduction: Histories of the Present,” in *Victorian Afterlives: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), ix. Sadoff and Kucich are writing about *Chueless*, Amy Heckerling’s adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Emma* (Sadoff and Kucich 2000).
  13. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 151–162 (Stewart 1984).
  14. Mullaney, “Strange Things,” 42.
  15. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. Albert J. Rivero (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 23 (Swift 2002).
  16. Critics frequently applied the word “classic” in their reviews of *Gulliver’s Travels*. See for example Scott Bowles, “Films Naughty or Nice?” *USA Today*, November 5, 2010; Dann Gire, “Giant Waste,” *Chicago Daily Herald*, December 24, 2010. For a discussion of the implications of terms like “classic” or “quality,” see for example Monk, “British ‘heritage film,’” 116 or Charlotte Brunsdon, “Problems with Quality,” *Screen* 31, no. 1 (1990): 67–90 (Bowles 2010; Gire 2010; Brunsdon 1990).
  17. Geraghty, *Major Motion Picture*, 15.
  18. Landy, *Cinematic Uses*, 6.

19. While most critics mentioned the urination scene in their reviews, they also recognized it as a feature of the original. Chris Knight calls it a “childish bit of gross-out humour but unassailable by dint of being taken directly from Swift’s occasionally ribald book” while Rick Groen observes, “Only then do the two Blacks, Jack’s mannerisms and Jonathan’s mind, find common ground.” Brilliantly channeling Jonathan Swift, A.O. Scott writes, “This was, indeed, the only moment at which it seemed that the temperament of the Picture corresponded, in some degree, to my own.” Chris Knight, “This Gulliver is None Too Swift,” *The Gazette*, December 24, 2010; Rick Groen, “Jack Black Aside, This Gulliver is Worth Sizing Up,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 24, 2010; A.O. Scott, “A Gut Visible All the Way from the 18th Century,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 2010 (Knight 2010; Groen 2010; Scott 2010).
20. After all, Gulliver conquers General Edward’s giant robot with Horatio’s help, not Darcy’s, despite the fact that Horatio is a Lilliputian and Darcy is taller than Gulliver.
21. Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 99.
22. Mary Favret, “Being True to Jane Austen,” in *Victorian Afterlives: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Dianne F. Sadoff and John Kucich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 80; Andrew Osmond, “Gulliver’s Travels,” *Sight & Sound* 23, no. 1 (March 2011): 58 (Favret 2000; Osmond 2011).
23. Christopher Lim, “Gulliver’s Travails,” *The Business Times Singapore*, August 5, 2011 (Lim 2011).

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