



“Insurrection, Riot, and Points of Difference”

The Impacts of Different Characterizations of the Rebellion in Adaptations of *Les Misérables*



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How Adaptational Changes and Visual Cues Used to Characterize the June Rebellion Affect the Audience's View of Its Role in the Story

Abstract

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is the world's most frequently adapted novel, but the 1832 June Rebellion, the climax and culmination of the book's political ideals, is nearly always cut down in adaptation in favor of Jean Valjean's more traditional storyline. Because its role is so minimized, the characters and ideals of the rebellion are oversimplified for the audience, whose members often come away with an incomplete idea of the rebellion and its importance to the story. The aim of this project is to analyze the various techniques used in adaptations to characterize the rebellion and ascertain what impact they have on the audience.

Introduction

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*

- Written from exile in 1862 (Second French Empire)
- Can be read as a series of intersecting case studies to convince the reader of Hugo's political ideals
- Most of the book shows characters struggling to survive and help others in an inhumane system
- In the novel's climax, students and workers rise up in rebellion in an effort to change that system
- Hugo writes the failed rebellion not as a hopeless tragedy, but as a symbolic triumph to inspire his readers to further action

Les Misérables in Adaptation

- Those viewing adaptations of Hugo's highly relevant novel often have a hard time making connections to the present day
- Adaptations frequently relegate the rebellion to a background role or simplify its ideals
 - Politics become vague or ahistorically sensationalized
- Changes to the rebellion in the process of adaptation, in the form of characterization and visual cues, affect the audience's view of the rebellion and the ways in which it connects to their own lives

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Methods

- Analyzed **twelve adaptations** in French and English
 - Only adaptations that retain historical setting
 - Focus on film, television, and theatre adaptations
 - Designed to appeal to the largest possible audience
 - Likely to exert creative license in order to fit the constraints of the medium
- Notes taken on five categories to analyze effect on audience's view of the rebellion:
 - Historical **context** and exposition
 - Appearance of the **barricade(s)**
 - Other visual revolutionary **symbols**
 - Collective **characterization** of the insurgents
 - Individual characterization of **Enjolras**, their leader



Phrygian cap with tricolor cockade

Results

- **Three basic approaches** used by adaptations to justify the rebellion
- **1. Historical approach**
 - Example: *Les Misérables* (1958), dir. Jean-Paul Le Chanois
 - Provide specific **historical and political context** for the rebellion
 - **Logical and strategic insurgents** clearly articulate their grievances with the government and their goals for the future
 - French Revolution referenced in terms of its ideals
 - Paving stone stairs behind barricade, furniture in front
- **2. Emotional approach**
 - Example: 1985 stage musical by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg
 - Setting and politics are vague, insurgents discuss motivations in **general terms**
 - Emphasis on **camaraderie** among insurgents, but can appear naïve
 - Easily recognizable French Revolutionary apparel
 - Barricade haphazardly constructed of random objects
- **3. Unjustified rebellions**
 - Example: *Les Misérables* (1935), dir. Richard Boleslawski
 - Unjustified due to lack of attention or mischaracterization
 - **Little or no historical context**, few references to French Revolution or other ideals
 - Insurgents characterized as **violent and impulsive**; uprising is purely a **plot device**
- Both methods of justifying the rebellion (1 and 2) have their advantages and disadvantages. Audiences understand the logic of the historical approach, but struggle to breach the gap of historical distance to empathize with the insurgents, while audiences connect deeply to the emotional approach, but see the rebellion as a tragic defeat difficult to connect to the issues present in their own lives.
- Adaptations can best replicate the **effect of the novel** and bring out the rebellion's **importance to the story** by both **specifying its ideals** and making the insurgents **relatable to audience members**.

The Rebellion in Adaptation

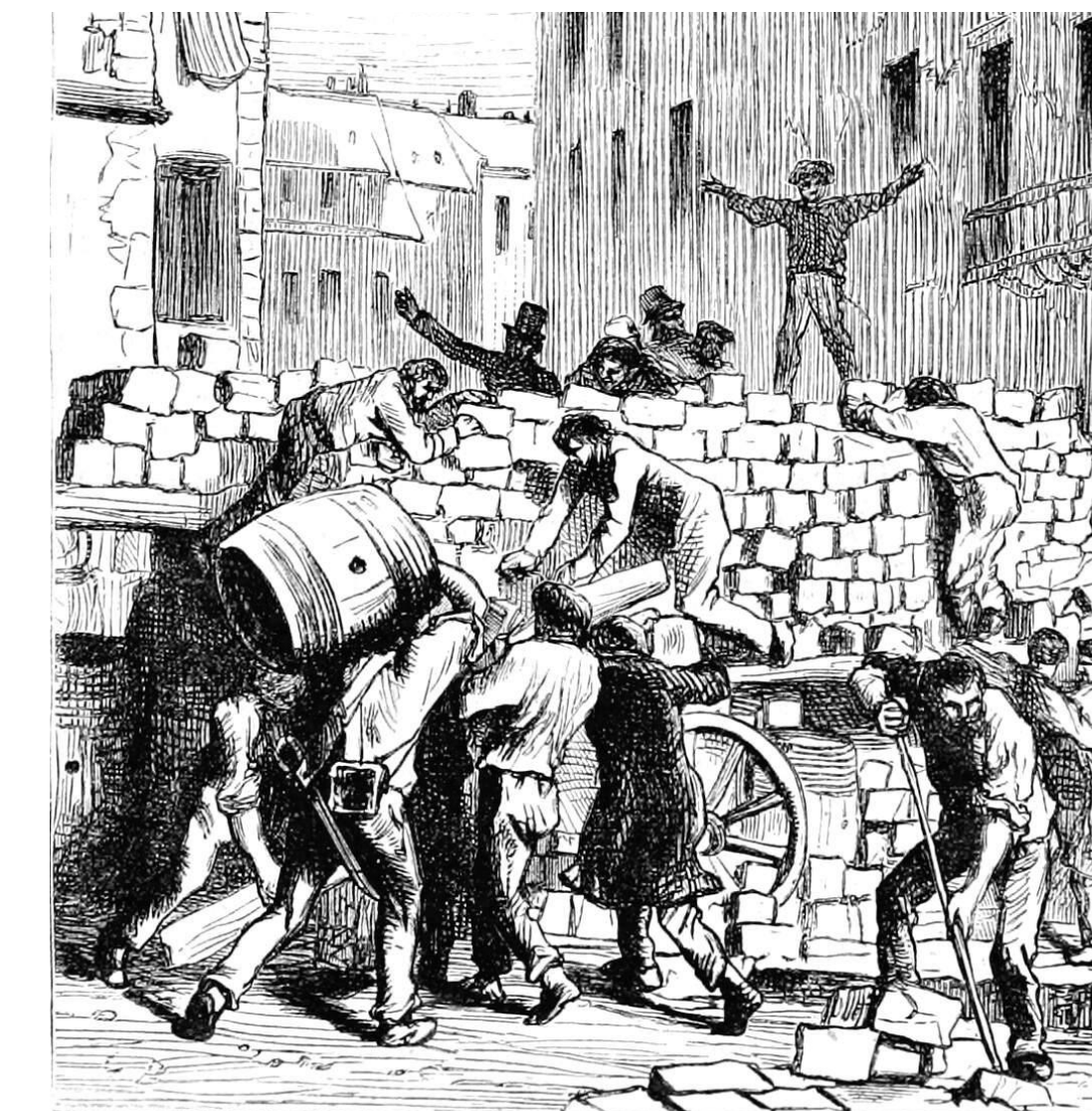


Illustration of a paving stone barricade in an early *LM* edition



Rioting mob with torches from Boleslawski's 1935 film



Large, cluttered barricade, ornamented with flags and coffins, from Hooper's 2012 musical movie

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