

Book Review. Jane Austen to Screen: Transcoding *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*

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In one of her essays, renowned scholar Pia Brînzeu attempts to find out what makes Shakespeare so attractive for such a wide range of artists, from writers to painters and movie directors, who rewrite, reframe, reimagine Shakespeare's work, offering "an ever-increasing list of [...] productions" (2016, p. 29). Brînzeu's conclusion is that the enormous amount of Shakespearean revisions demonstrate "without doubt that Shakespeare is frantically haunting us. Like a ghost. Like an ineluctable intertextual ghost" (pp. 29–30).

Interestingly enough, Harold Bloom decides to open his *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Jane Austen* with a parallel between Shakespeare and Austen:

The oddest yet by no means inapt analogy to Jane Austen's art of representation is Shakespeare's ... Like Shakespeare, she gives us figures, major and minor, utterly consistent each in her or his own mode of speech and being, and utterly different from one another. Her heroines have firm selves, each molded with an individuality that continues to suggest Austen's reserve of power, her potential for creating an endless diversity. (Bloom, 2009, p. 1)

It becomes obvious, thus, that just like Shakespeare, Austen also haunts us through a plethora of adaptations, both on paper as well as on screen. This is something that Iuliana Borbely also points out in the currently reviewed book, *Reading and Watching Jane Austen: Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice*:

In the timeline of English literary history she is the second most frequently adapted author—Shakespeare being the first—and the first most frequently adapted novelist.

All her novels have been adapted to film at least twice, her first two works, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, have been adapted four and nine times, respectively. These adaptations have also given birth to a score of other products like posters, fan-sites, calendars, entertainment columns in newspapers. Helen Fielding based her hero Mark Darcy in *Bridget Jones's Diary* on the Mr Darcy played by Colin Firth in the 1995 BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice*. (p. 6)

Such is the conclusion of a great number of researchers, one of which aptly states: "the past fifteen years have witnessed a boom of film and television adaptations based on Jane Austen's novels, her life and various cultural phenomena in some way connected to her" (Selejan, 2010, p. 115). Moreover, Selejan (p. 116) quotes famous writer Martin Amis, who, in a 1996 *New Yorker* article compares Jane Austen to prolific director Quentin Tarantino, considering the former more popular in the film industry, and she concludes that the situation is very much the same. Therefore, both literature and film scholars are presented with rich research material, and in her book, *Reading and Watching Jane Austen: Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice*, Iuliana Borbely sets up to such a task.

From the introduction, Borbely emphasizes that despite the vast range of texts adapted to movies, some raise considerable difficulty due to a lack of action. Moreover, literary classics fall into the same category of challenging texts to adapt, due to their popularity: "being more widely known, the readers' expectations with the adaptations of classics are also higher" (p. 5), since readers generally look for film versions that are as faithful to the written text as possible. Such an expectation, the author persuasively argues, introduces the topic of fidelity, a "hazy" term, in Borbely's words, still difficult to define. Thus, the scholar opts for Andrew Dudley's more complex definition, as the American film theorist distinguishes between "fidelity to the letter or to the spirit of the novel" (p. 28). However, the author clarifies the following points regarding fidelity: firstly and most importantly, the term should not have a value judgment, but a descriptive one; and, secondly, fidelity is not possible, since the comparison deals with two different media.

Nonetheless, the reader is informed that the book does not intend to focus either on the multiple whys and wherefores the novels of Jane Austen have become so popular or on the use of fidelity as a value judgment. The purpose of the book is to analyze the relation between the novels and their screen adaptations through the lens of the cinematic rhetoric used in the adaptation process. In addition, the author sets up to demonstrate

that diversification of cinematic rhetoric applied to transcoding Austen novels to film, and the heavy reliance on visual storytelling techniques offer a romanticized view of characters, reform them radically and allow physicality to seep into the story against a historically highly accurate backdrop. (p. 8)

Moreover, this shift towards visual storytelling techniques in Austen adaptations contributes to their growing iconicity.

As far as the choice of Austen's novels as well as their screen adaptations to be discussed, Borbely clearly justifies her choice. The selection of these two novels is predicated upon their recurrent adaptation within the past two decades, occurring in succession with sufficient proximity to manifest the trends posited by the author's analytical framework. The novels are examined through the lens of their adaptability, while the meticulous analysis of the adaptations centers on the specific aspects of the original works accentuated by the producers and the cinematic rhetorical strategies employed to accomplish such emphasis.

The book begins with a well-structured introduction, providing an overview of the topics covered and setting the stage for the subsequent chapters. Chapter I serves as a foundation, introducing readers to adaptation theory and its relevance to Austen's works. The sub-sections within this chapter cover a range of essential aspects, including the previously mentioned fidelity discourse, the relationship between the novel and the adaptation, reception theory, and intermediality. One important aspect that the author insists upon when discussing adaptation and intermediality is the clarification of terminology: Borbely stresses the fact that due to the presence of two media, novel and film, an adaptation deals with a transfer of meaning from one sign in a medium to another in the second medium. Thus, the term proposed and used throughout the book is transcoding. The eight sub-sections of the first chapter effectively lay the groundwork for understanding the subsequent analysis of adaptations.

Chapter II delves into a comprehensive analysis of Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* and its subsequent adaptations, specifically focusing on two miniseries produced in 1981 and 2008, as well as a feature film released in 1996. The chapter begins with a concise overview of the novel's themes and critical reception during the Regency era. The examination of the novel encompasses three key dimensions: firstly, the novel's capacity for social criticism; secondly, the significant role played by a multitude of minor characters in facilitating this critique; and finally, the narrative devices employed by Austen to safeguard her text from descending into sentimentalism. The author then examines these three specific adaptations, starting with the 1981 adaptation, which

demonstrates a nuanced portrayal of the social scene. The 1995 adaptation is explored in terms of its restrained yet sentimental approach, the foregrounding of male characters, and its modern interpretation. The author also analyzes the 2008 adaptation, highlighting its use of visual techniques to express social criticism.

Chapter III undertakes a focused investigation of *Pride and Prejudice* and its adaptations, encompassing four notable renditions. The examination of the novel entails a comprehensive exploration of its distinctive aspects, including the central emphasis on Elizabeth Bennet's narrative trajectory within the symmetrical framework of the novel, wherein both Elizabeth and Darcy must undergo personal reform to attain their ultimate reward. Furthermore, the novel presents certain challenges and facilitations for filmmakers. Notably, the absence of authoritative character descriptions poses both a hurdle and a convenience. The absence of explicit physical portrayals allows for creative interpretation by producers who rely on hints regarding stature, attitude, and behavior to identify suitable actors. Additionally, the dialogues, resembling transcripts, necessitate considerable interpretative efforts, as the emotional nuances and reactions of the characters are rarely explicitly indicated. Lastly, the adaptation of the epistolary elements present in the novel, while capable of impeding the pacing and rendering an adaptation less engaging, is also acknowledged as a significant aspect deserving attention.

In the pursuit of identifying a series of temporally consecutive adaptations, the 1940 version stands out as an exception. Nevertheless, its inclusion in this analysis is warranted for several reasons. Firstly, according to the author, it aligns with what Thomas Leitch refers to as the Tradition of Quality, characterized by a meticulous adherence to faithfulness. While the 1940 version cannot be unequivocally described as slavishly faithful, it does modify the plot, significantly reformulates the portrayal of the Bennet family, and places Elizabeth on a pedestal. Remarkably, it is the only adaptation that has undergone two levels of separation from the original source material, as it is based on a Broadway play. Furthermore, the 1940 version represents the sole mainstream feature film adaptation available, although a Latter-Day-Saints rendition exists, albeit with limited distribution. Lastly, a compelling argument for the inclusion of the 1940 adaptation lies in its exceptional utilization of humor as a primary tool in transposing the novel to the screen. The 1980 adaptation is examined for its exploration of character and narrator fusion, while the 1995 adaptation is analyzed in terms of its gaze, fetishization of Darcy, and transcoding of the original material. The 2005 adaptation is explored for its blending of modernity with tradition, romanticized protagonists, and the portrayal of a happy family.

One of the book's strengths lies in its clear and organized structure, with each chapter and sub-section building upon the previous ones. The comprehensive coverage of various adaptations, spanning different decades, provides a comprehensive view of the evolution of Austen's works in different contexts and media. The author's analytical approach, combining literary criticism with insights from film and media studies, adds richness and depth to the exploration of the adaptations. By examining themes, narrative devices, character portrayals, and visual techniques, the author offers a well-rounded perspective on the successes and challenges of adapting Austen's novels.

While the book primarily focuses on *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the inclusion of chapters dedicated to adaptation theory and its fundamental concepts enhances the book's academic value. This broader theoretical foundation not only allows readers to grasp the complexities of adapting Austen's works but also invites further exploration and discussion within the field of adaptation studies. Moreover, the author suggests future paths for exploration, pointing out that subsequent investigations could ascertain the generalizability of these findings across adaptations of all Austen novels or discern their specificity to solely the initial two works. Additionally, Borbely proposes, future research endeavors could center on the examination of cultural transpositions of Austen's novels, particularly given that three of her works have already undergone adaptation by Bollywood producers, namely *Pride and Prejudice* (Bride and Prejudice, 2004), *Sense and Sensibility* (I Have Found It, 2000), and *Emma* (Aisha, 2010).

Overall, *Reading and Watching Jane Austen: Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice* is an essential resource for scholars, students, and enthusiasts interested in the adaptation of literary works. The author's expertise in the subject matter, combined with the comprehensive analysis of adaptations, makes this book a valuable contribution to the field of adaptation studies and Austen scholarship.

References

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