

Transfer and Dominance: Reading vs. Watching – Iuliana Borbely's *Reading and Watching Jane Austen. Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice*

Dan Horațiu Popescu*

Iuliana Borbely has been for long into studying the multiple interactions between books, mostly classical, and their screen adaptations. As a colleague I could not but notice, in the last decade, the significant number of students delivering graduation papers on such



Iuliana Borbely

Reading and Watching Jane Austen:

Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice



topics, under her supervision. And that accounts for her power of persuasion, the passion she has succeeded to convey to younger subjects, both readers and viewers, and her constant concern for an almost global phenomenon. Cultural and social, this phenomenon stands for a landmark of our increasingly digital age, and it often troubles more established or more conventional perceptions. The major question to be addressed and answered is which the dominant is. The book or the movie? Should we choose *reading* over *watching* or the other way round? Or embrace the two as distinctly

accomplished types of artistic discourse?

Based on her PhD thesis, this book, published by Lambert Academic in 2020, has been structured in such a way as to provide answers for even more questions than the ones mentioned above. An extensive introductory chapter dedicated to adaptation theory sets forth the issue of “Fidelity”, something to be resumed later in the book; then approaches the condition of the two discourses in “Novel and Adaptation, Equals”; discusses the relation between “Adaptation and Reception Theory” and points to the fragile position of *intertextuality* in “Adaptations and Intermediality”. In order to be answered, the question “What Is a Good Adaptation?” requires a deep understanding of “The

* Associate Professor, Partium Christian University, Oradea, dhpopescu@yahoo.com

Adapting Process – Practical Aspects”. And last but not least, “Cinematic Rhetoric” deserves a solid analysis when “Adapting Austen.”

The bibliography supporting the critical and theoretical inquiries is pertinent and impressive. Major names – such as Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, or Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Hans Georg Gadamer and Gerrard Genette or Paul Ricoeur, Virginia Woolf and Walter Benjamin, Stanley Fish and Laura Mulvey or Linda Hutcheon – are employed when trying to pinpoint the essential aspects of the adaptation processes. The author’s own contributions in the field are inserted without ostentation, as well as by others from the same academic environment, such as Ágnes Pethő’s. The judicious selection of works cited and consulted is another sign of Iuliana Borbely’s awareness of the relevance of the topic for the 21st Century readers and theatre goers (or recently Netflix aficionados?).

Authorial intentions are discussed vs. readers’ interpretation, passivity vs. engagement, the facets of the text, meaning and structure, the independence of the literary text, the horizon of expectations, etc. Also the evolution of the elevation of the iconic text, the transformation of the hypotext, or the past as perceived through the present, mechanical reproduction and authenticity. A major concept thoroughly detailed is the one of *transcoding*, understood not as a mere translation, but as a way of transposing an artefact from one medium to another, of finding equivalents from one system codes or semiotic signs to another.

The two chapters dedicated to the adaptations of two seminal texts by Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, are well documented and minutely interpreted case-studies. The former begins with an appreciation of the 1811 novel, for its “Criticism of Regency England”, underlying what might be a challenge in the process of adaptation, i.e. “The vast range of characters”, and showing how Austen made use of “Narrative devices against sentimentality”. Another subchapter deals with one of the three adaptations the author had in mind, “Quiet solicitude: *Sense and Sensibility* in 1981,” with a focus on “The social scene”. The peculiar case of another, famous adaptation, is addressed in “Restrained yet sentimental: the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility*”, with its divisions on “Showing versus telling” and “Foregrounding male characters”. We could not entirely figure out the choice for the title of the last division, “Modern *Sense and Sensibility*”, as it is about a 1995 adaptation, which is temporally framed well within the post-modernist age. Unless it pertains to the way Emma Thompson, the author of the script, handled the character of Elinor Dashwood, i.e. in a way that some critics regarded as anti-feminist. Finally, the third subchapter is about the 2008 BBC adaptation, “Spiced-up *Sense and*

Sensibility” and includes an analysis on “Social criticism expressed through visual techniques”.

Special consideration is given to Emma Thompson’s work on the script, as the author wanted to make her readers grasp the intensity of the process and as well as the way certain concepts presented in the introductory chapter are effectively illustrated in this second one. *Fidelity*, for instance, was something the actress and script-writer acknowledged as not having been attempted. Thompson was more prone to achieving *the spirit of the book* rather than slavishly following the text. References are made to Emma Thompson’s diary on her work with the manuscript and on her collaboration with Ang Lee, the director of the movie, as she wanted to include scenes laden with symbolism, eventually rejected for practical reasons. Other scenes, although not appearing in the book or reflecting its spirit, made their way through and are a proof of how adaptations truly work. Iuliana Borbely has paid a significant amount of attention to Thompson’s tribulations or avatars when writing the script, to her fight with simplifying the language of Austen’s novel or foregrounding the male characters, as the actress was writing and re-writing scenes with certain fellow actors in mind, i.e. Hugh Grant and Alan Rickman.

The same inspired and accurate analysis is to be found in the third chapter, dedicated to *Pride and Prejudice*, the 1813 novel, and its adaptations. It opens with “a light and and bright and sparkling” adaptation from 1940 (screen play by Aldous Huxley), a subchapter the divisions of which are: “Fitted to a modern worldview: changes in underlying ideologies”, beginning with the observation that social status and its representation is emphasized to a greater degree in the adaptation; then “Sources of humour” and “Neutral territory”. The next subchapter gets “Inside the mind of a character: The *Pride and Prejudice* of 1980” and the author’s observation is that the opening sequence announces that “nothing highly dramatic is to be shown” (Borbely, 2020: 118). “Fusing character and narrator” and “Exploiting discourse in the service of fidelity” are the main divisions, reiterating the theoretical issues previously debated.

The subchapter “An inviting gaze – the *Pride and Prejudice* of 1995” is dedicated to the adaptation currently perceived – despite its miniseries format that allowed more ground for fidelity – as controversial due to its “newly introduced sexuality” in certain scenes, and also as the epitome of all adaptations. The subchapter has, besides “Gaze” with notes on scopophilia, a division on “Fetishizing Darcy”, in which the authors states that “the Darcy of the source text was sacrificed in order to create a new one. Darcy was adapted to the late-twentieth century” (Borbely, 2020: 141). The last division, “Transcoding *Pride and*

Prejudice in 1995”, invites to more theoretical reflections, either on locations or on dialogue, with the latter mirroring “an attempt to respect the flavour of Austenian discourse, but at the same time [...] not allowed to dominate the film” (Borbely, 2020: 147). The flavor has been captured due to extensive research, as documented in *The Making of Pride and Prejudice*, since the producers wanted the viewers of the blockbuster to realize the magnitude of the efforts behind the scenes.

The ultimate answer to which the dominant is in the contest *text vs. adaptation* seems to be – according to the author of this very elaborate book, and also to other researchers in the field – that both discourses are given a comparably high status. No winner of the contest is therefore proclaimed in “Combining modernity with tradition in the *Pride and Prejudice* of 2005”, a final subchapter dealing with “Romanticized protagonists” or with “The deterministic and Romantic background”. The “Diffused sexuality coated in romance”, already signaled when discussing the 1995 adaptation, is further investigated with the same determination and accuracy, as “the film presents a strange mixture of sexuality and romance in the portrayal of the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy” (Borbely, 2020: 163). However, the spirit of the novel is preserved, “since physicality *per se* is avoided” (163).

All in all, the book is an opportunity, especially for those who are exploring the topic, to round up, temporarily, an image of a phenomenon which will continue to baffle and inspire readers and viewers across the world. And in this respect, each and every updating of the research is more than welcome.