

# **Jane Austen: comparison between text and screen**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Intertextuality, derives from the Latin *intertexto*, meaning to intermingle while weaving. Intertextuality is a term first introduced by Batchin and spread by the semiotician Julia Kristeva in the late sixties. According to her a literary work is not just the product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts. Intertextuality is a way of accounting for the role of literary and extra-literary materials, without recourse to traditional notions of authorship. Roland Barthes proclaims the death of the author because intertextuality allows the text to be a new tissue of past citations. Genette studies everything concerning the text, evident or not: prefaction, postfaction, cover, notes, subtitles etc.

The goal of this study is the intersemiotic translation. In every translation it is advisable to work out a strategy that rationally enables us to decide what are the most distinctive components of the text and, conversely, those that can be sacrificed.

The translated text is inevitably not equivalent to the prototext and, at the same time, it contains something more or something less with respect to the prototext. The translator must make a series of decisions aimed at pinpointing the dominant of the text, not only in an intrinsic sense but also in function of the cultural context in which the original text is located, and within the receiving culture where it is projected.

Thus in the translated text, many references and components such as denotative and connotative aspects, images, sounds, rhythms, syntactic structures

may be very different. Our task is to analyse *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and two filmic translations, one broadcast by the BBC in 1995 and the other directed by Joe Wright in 2005. Indeed, the intersemiotic translator, willing or not, is forced to divide the original text into parts.

After having disassembled the prototext into parts, she/he must find a translating element for each of them, then reassemble them, recreating coherence and cohesion. Every text is characterized by cultural and literary relation.

We can transfer the concept of text to any work: musical, pictorial, filmic etc. A filmic composition can be divided into different elements: dialogue between characters, geographical setting, possible voice-over, musical score, editing, framing, lighting, coloration, costumes, perspective, different timbre and intonation of human voices.

**Jane Austen** wrote her book between 1796 and 1797. She gives detailed descriptions of the psychological aspects but neglects many other accounts, on purpose of course. The geographical setting, for example, is almost absent. She just mentions the names of the places where the main characters live. We know Hertfordshire, Derbyshire, Pemberley, Netherfield, Longbourn, Cheapside, but we are not told how these places look like, except for Pemberley.

We don't even have any information about people's clothes. The only thing we read about it, is that one of the Bennet is preparing a nice hat, and that Lady Hurst has very nice laces and wears many bracelets. We learn that people enjoying dancing. She speaks about ball many times, but she doesn't explain how people are dressed up in that occasion, what kind of dances they perform.

Besides we are introduced to many characters but we don't know how they look like. She says that Bingley and Darcy are two handsome aristocrats and their sisters are very elegant. Darcy draws everybody's attention at the ball but he is too arrogant. We are told that Elizabeth smiles a bit too much and has nice eyes, but we don't even know their colour. We find out that rich people have servants and Elizabeth and the other girls change clothes before supper when they are at Bingley's.

We discover that women play music: Darcy's sister and Elizabeth. Lady Catherine investigates why Elizabeth's sisters don't play the piano as well, and wonders why they cannot draw or embroider. We learn that it is very important to have a coach in order to look rich. Thus we understand that horses and coaches are a status symbol in that society.

People play cards, but Elizabeth prefers reading. Life in town and in the countryside is different, and people who live there too. The Bennet and their neighbours are more simple than Darcy and Bingley who are more elegant and refined. In fact when the two young men go to the ball, they stand out for these qualities.

Due to the lack of the above mentioned details, it is easy to understand that the filmic versions are different because everybody can deal with these elements as they like.

**The BBC mini-series version** is composed of six episodes. It is starred by Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth and Colin Firth as Mr Darcy. It is extremely faithful to the dialogues and to the tone of the novel, in fact it was very well

received. Even when the film director has expanded some scenes, he has kept the general order in which the events occur.

This is possible because the mini-series allows more time for each section, when in a two-hour movie this is more difficult because a lot of cutting is needed, in order to fit a long story which does not happen as quickly as we see it. The BBC has a more conservative approach, perhaps because it is a British television.

Since we don't have any description of the characters, the film director has interpreted the few but very important suggestions about the protagonists. Elizabeth is intelligent and witty and has a special personality. The writer stresses many times the beauty of her eyes. But eyes are the mirror of people's soul, so we understand that she has a nice soul.

We are informed that she likes reading, which makes her different from the other women who usually attend manual tasks. Jennifer Ehle shows very well the spirited intelligence of Elizabeth. She is not a beauty, and even this corresponds to the book description. The fact that the writer doesn't say anything about Lizzie's beauty, implies that she is not. On the contrary Mr Darcy is said to be handsome and the choice of Colin Firth is a very good one, not only because of his undeniable charme but also because he has class, which is very important. Even if Jane Austen doesn't express this concept, it is implicit in Darcy's elegant behaviour towards his servants. In the BBC version this is stressed when his housekeeper says that his father was a lovely person and Darcy is like him, the best master one can have.

In this version it is depicted the Regency England where the lines of classes are strictly drawn. Like in Jane Austen we have the middle class represented by the Bennets and the upper-class Bingleys and Darcys. The costumes are more elegant than the ones in Wright's film and the interior too. There are nice pieces of furniture, paintings, objects in silver and porcelain. To crown it all there is a magnificent villa in Pemberley with a wonderful park all around, which gives the all story the sense of being set in a magic land.

The exhibition of this villa justifies the choice, made by the BBC, of having nicer clothes and hairstyles. This culminates in the scene of the ball, and in rich women's elegance, that Jane Austen reports many times. But it is also used by the film director in order to underline the difference between Lady Catherine, very rich person, and normal people such as the Bennets. This social difference is made more conspicuous by the costumes: the Bennets sisters wear 1770s clothes, instead Lady Catherine wears things from an earlier period.

**Pride and Prejudice is a story of two courtships:** Darcy- Elizabeth and Bingley-Jane. The book is a tale. We can recognize here a Propp's structure with a happy ending, obtained after the removal of a lot of obstacles. A love story is a safe bet for film directors who want to be successful. As a love story, the filmic version of this novel is intended for woman, first of all.

This female spectators are exploited by the cinema which does its best to satisfy them. And how? By giving them the possibility of living, through the female protagonist, a love story. And how is it possible? By using special devices that cinema can afford. For example by using a particular romantic music, a gaze direct to the camera so that seems to look at the viewer's eyes. All this favours

the process of identification with Elizabeth. In the first part of Austen's novel, up to Darcy's letter to Elizabeth, there are numerous occasions where the gaze is as central as the characters themselves. This kind of gaze is a source of pleasure and power for the onlooker in its commodification of its object. In a patriarchal culture such as Austen's, men are usually the bearers of this gaze, while women are its passive recipients.

But contrary to expectation, Austen's Elizabeth actively resists Darcy's gaze, by means of her wit and sense of humour and, most importantly, by returning the gaze, to some extent becoming its subject. The BBC mini-series establishes an intertextual dialogue with this dimension of the novel to the extent of transforming the gaze, not only Darcy's and Elizabeth's, but that of the female spectator.

The first episode itself opens with an added scene. As Bingley and Darcy ride to observe Netherfield, which Bingley will eventually decide to take. They don't know that they are objects of observation too, because Elizabeth watches them from a slightly elevated plateau. This not only makes Elizabeth the subject of the gaze within the diegesis, but also, equally importantly, invites the viewer to share her point of view.

This is relevant in so far as it is the beginning of the construction of Darcy as the object of desire of the female spectator. Camerawork is also decisive here; although we can clearly see Bingley's face, Darcy is the subject of the gaze he directs at Elizabeth, and simultaneously he is the object of the female spectator's desiring gaze. Furthermore, the added scenes also provide insights into Darcy's feelings which the novel, because it is mostly focalised through Elizabeth, does

not fully explore. This promotes the female spectators' sympathy towards a hero who embodies a masculinity which differs greatly from that of Austen's Darcy.

While the nineteenth-century character remains mostly distant and impenetrable, Colin Firth is allowed to express weaknesses, doubts and emotions, in order to satisfy the taste of modern women.

Elizabeth's unexpected stay at Netherfield during Jane's illness proves the perfect occasion to develop this portrait of Darcy. In three separate added scenes, Darcy's gaze is highlighted in the first one, when Elizabeth steps into the billiards room by mistake, she finds Darcy, who fixes his eyes on her, in a desiring regard that lingers for a few seconds and is only broken on Darcy's initiative.

In the third one, Elizabeth is unaware of Darcy's intensely gazing from an upper window at her and Jane's carriage as they leave Netherfield.

### **Joe Wright 's version**

Most works of literature undergo significant cuts when adapted for film for many reasons: matter of time, money, difference reception: readers are more cultivated than the majority of cinema goers and different codes. Some scenes loose or gain importance on the screen which has its peculiar codes and grammar. Here some of the most notable changes by Wright, from the original book:

- Heavy time compression of several major sequences, including Elizabeth's visit to Rosings Park and Hunsford Parsonage, Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley, and Lydia's elopement and its subsequent crisis.

- The elimination of several supporting characters, including Louisa Hurst, Mr. Hurst, Maria Lucas, Mr. and Mrs. Phillips, the Gardiners' children, and various military officers and townspeople.
- The elimination of several sections in which characters reflect or converse on events that have recently occurred, for example, Elizabeth's chapter-long change of mind after reading Darcy's letter.

We must bear in mind that each movie adaptation is shaped on the particular reading of the film director and it corresponds to an interpretation of the text, according to personal experiences, sensibility, nationality and education.

This may bring to different aspects of the novel. Joe Wright, the film director of the Universal Picture version of P&P, tries to reproduce the tone of the novel and tries to make the movie more comprehensible to a modern audience, but sometime his choices are questionable (this issue will also come up with the choice of the language used in some dialogues).

To start with the “justifiable” changes, we must give credit to the director for trying to be as close as possible to the general idea that life in Regency period was not so “tidy” as it is portrayed in the BBC version. He said that life was pretty dirty in those days. They would have only bathed once a week. Their clothes would be rarely washed.”<sup>1</sup>

This is one of the main reasons why, for example, there's a general condition of neglect in hair, clothing and interior/exterior shots. Many of the characters have hair that is loosely arranged or greasy, wear clothing that is untidy

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<sup>1</sup> “Tackling a Classic: Joe Wright on Pride & Prejudice”, available from <http://www.....>, [Ultimo accesso: 02<sup>nd</sup> March, 2008].



or dirty, dwell in rooms that are cluttered. The houses of the Bennet is crowded with chickens, geese, cows, dogs, horses, and pigs.

The Bennets live in a disorganized way. They don't really have the finances to keep a house like the one shown by the BBC version, whose interiors are always tidy, richly decorated, with nice furniture and a lot of valuable paintings on the walls.

Another expansion made by the Wright concerns his "attention" to the body, which is displayed in many circumstances, not only during the evening balls, where it is clear that body language plays a vital role with gazes and hands touches.

He is also concerned in drawing our attention to the protagonist's hands, and also to the expression of their faces. It has been said that he is obsessed with hands, in fact there are several scenes where the focus is on them. On at least three different occasions he frames the hand flexing, hanging in repose, or slyly grasping the back of a woman's dress.

Eyes and hands are the body parts most figured in this interpretation as opposed to the distracting low-cut empire-style dresses of the BBC version, which focuses Regency period that draws everyone's attention on women's busts. And again this attention to hands must be connected to the fact that they were the only part which connected the characters in a time too concerned with physical boundaries. A simple hand contact was a memorable event.

This is the reason why the film director's chooses to show us Elizabeth without gloves at the Netherfield ball, because her naked hands allow a physical contact with Mr. Darcy, when they dance together.

These paratactic features are extremely useful because they make us understand that, for example, the love between Elizabeth and Darcy is truly love at first sight. They struggle, in vain, against their attraction, because of a series of misunderstandings, whose disentanglement is at the basis of the development of the plot. Each meeting between them is emotionally charged.

It's a love which is displayed physically, but unexpressed verbally, because, until the proposal, each attempt to communicate fails.

The location is different here from the BBC version where it takes place inside the parsonage, like in the novel. Wright's proposal takes place outdoors, under the rain, and the two protagonists meet after crossing a bridge. This scene is a metaphor, the bridge is intended to fill the gap between them, they are separated by something: their pride and their prejudice.

The choice of water can also be read as something that purifies, water that cleans their sin of arrogance and prejudice, besides reinforcing the attention for the bodies which are all drenched with rain. We can create a parallelism between Colin Firth diving in the lake and Matthew MacFadyen all wet under the rain. The BBC, indirectly, created a sex symbol out of Colin Firth/Mr. Darcy with his "diving in the lake".

The idea of sexuality and body is stressed in another change made in this movie: Mr. Darcy is represented in a statues collection, instead of a painting in the gallery, when Elizabeth visits Mr. Darcy's estate in Pemberley. All this statues, by Canova, are not mentioned in the novel.

This choice can be well assimilated to the discourse of sexuality, in the sense that Lizzie is not in front of a flat painting, but in front of something which

gives more the idea of a real body, given its 3-dimensional nature. In this scene it is also important to pay attention to Elizabeth face, which both expresses her admiration towards the beauty of Mr. Darcy and her surprise at his riches. But she finally understands Darcy's true character, and his aesthetic sensibility, by seeing where he lives and what surrounds him every day.

This can also be seen as a journey into her mind, through the discovery of her thoughts and her feelings towards Darcy. This description occupies a long section in the novel, but it is cut and left to a minimum, just to the visual, in the movie.

This feature, assimilated with the choice of the picturesque setting in Pemberley, may also bring about another issue: movies nowadays can promote the Country where they are shot, and so they become an indirect form of advertisement. A proof of that are, for example, all the "Jane Austen Guides of England", or the "Guides to Jane Austen Country", which are nothing but guides about the locations of the adaptation of Jane Austen's novels, aiming at promoting famous estates used as settings. There is also a social discourse here, in the sense that this movie helps making up a sort of patriotism and a sense of belonging. It is an attempt to promote a sense of unbroken tradition that confirms national identity.

Wright recurs to metaphor and intertextuality even when he shows Elizabeth on the rock who dominates the panorama. It is like saying that she wants to dominate her life, she doesn't allow society to master it with a marriage of convenience, she wants to marry somebody she loves. This shot is particularly nice and it reminds us the painting *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (*Viandante sul*

*mare di nebbia*Der) by Caspar David Friedrich, realized in 1818 which is the



manifesto of German Romanticism.

In fact intertextuality is something that often occurs in cinema. It is nice and easy to have the image already done and studied by some clever painter. Diderot, one of the father of the modern theatre, has always suggested to turn to paintings for inspiration. Besides it is really catching to show something familiar to the audience, or something that is already part of people's imaginary.

### **Costume analysis:**

By the early-to-mid 1790s, the French Revolution produces a certain simplification in women's clothes. After the revolution, in fact no one wants to appear to be an aristocrat anymore. We see a strong movement toward simplicity and democratization of dress: the hoop-skirts of the 1740s are left behind under the influence of new ideals spread by the the American and French Revolution and the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

This reaction against the uncomfortable and too expensive dresses of the former royal regime, gives rise to a new aesthetic called Neo-classicism. It is during the second half of the 1790s that women in France began to adopt a Classical style, like the garments on Greek and Roman statues with narrow clinging skirts. This short trains, trailing behind, start being very fashionable.

In this period, women's clothing styles were based on the Empire silhouette, their dresses were closely-fitted to the torso, just under the bust, falling loosely below.

In different contexts, such styles are commonly called Directoire, referring to the Directory which ran France during the second half of the 1790s. Or Empire, referring to Napoleon's 1804-1814/1815 empire, and often also to his 1800-1804 consulate. Or Regency, most precisely referring to the 1811-1820 period of George IV's formal Regency.

This painting, by Jacques-Louis David, portrays Mme de Verninac and shows the late 1790s Parisian Greek look. High-waisted, natural figure is the simple and unformal fashion spreads in 1795-1820 all around Europe.



Inspired by neoclassical tastes these clothes are often made of muslin, which is easily washed and draps loosely. White is considered the most suitable colour for neo-classical clothing.

Among middle and upper class women, there is a basic distinction between morning and evening dresses. Both men and women changed clothes in preparation for the evening meal and possible entertainments to follow. There are also further gradations such as afternoon dress, walking dress, riding habits, travelling dress and dinner dress.

Morning dresses are worn inside the house in the morning and in the afternoons as well as. They are high-necked and long-sleeved, in order to cover throat and wrists. Generally plain.

Ball gowns, or evening dresses, are often trimmed and decorated with laces and ribbons. They have low cut, but the bosom and the shoulders of young

girls must be displayed without exceeding. Bared arms must be covered with long white gloves.

We read this in the *English Lady's Costume, or The mirror of the graces*, published in London in 1811. It depicts the English lady's costume and says that a lady should combine and harmonize taste and judgment, elegance, grace, modesty and simplicity. She should adapt the various articles of female embellishments to different ages, forms, and complexions; to the seasons of the year, rank, and situation in life.

It also offers the most efficacious means of preserving beauty, health, according with the general principles of nature. It suggests how to carry the body, etc. Young ladies should wear softer shades of color, such as pink or lilac. The mature matron can afford fuller colours, such as purple, black, or deep blue.



**Hairstyles:** During this period, the classical influence also extends to hairstyles. Often masses of curls are worn over the forehead and ears, with the longer back hair drawn up into loose buns, influenced by Greek and Roman styles



as we see in this portrait :

Then, by the later 1810s, front hair is parted in the center and worn in tight ringlets over the ears. A few adventurous women wear short hairstyles. Despite

this innovation, a lot of conservative married women continue to wear linen mob



caps as shown in the picture:

This cap can also have wider brims at the sides, to cover the ears as it is



shown in this picture of a Parisien journal, 1818:

Then it is easy to see other bonnets with crowns and brims adorned with increasingly elaborate ornamentations, such as feathers and ribbons. Just not respectable woman would leave the house without a hat or a bonnet.

### **Accessories:**

Gloves are always worn outside the house. When worn inside, as when making a social call, or on formal occasions, such as a ball, they are removed when dining. About the length of the glove, A Lady of Distinction writes that the prevailing fashion rejects the long sleeve, and partially displays the arm, let the glove advance considerably above the elbow, and there is fastened with a draw-string or armlet. But this should only be the case when the arm is muscular, coarse, or scraggy.

When it is fair, smooth, and round, it will admit of the glove being pushed down to a little above the wrists. Fans, made of paper or silk on sticks of ivory and wood, and printed with oriental motifs or popular scenes of the era, are used by fashionable ladies and gentlemen to cool themselves and enhance gestures and body language.

**The silhouette of men's fashion** changes in similar ways by the mid-1820s. We see coats featured broad shoulders with puffed sleeves and a narrow waist.

In Britain, Beau Brummell introduces trousers, perfect tailoring, unadorned shirts with high collars, perfectly tied cravats, and exquisitely tailored plain dark coats. Brummell abandons his wig and cut his hair short in a Roman fashion, *à la Brutus*.

Older men, military officers, and those in conservative professions such as lawyers and physicians retain their wigs and powder into this period, but younger men of fashion wear their hair in short curls, often with long sideburns.

Thus this period sees the final abandonment of laces and embroideries. Pleated frills at the cuffs and front opening go out of fashion by the end of the period. Breeches are longer, tightly-fitted. Coats are cutaway in front with long skirts or tails behind, and had tall standing collars. Overcoats or greatcoats are fashionable, often with contrasting collars of fur or velvet. Boots calf-high boots become the rage after the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815.

Tricorne and bicorne hats are still worn, but the most fashionable hat is tall and slightly conical, this will evolve into the top hat and reign as the only hat for formal occasions for the next century.



Let's see the style gallery 1795-1800: long redingote over a coat, tan waistcoat, white shirt and cravat.



### Furniture analysis:

“Rococo” is a style of 18<sup>th</sup> century, it starts in France. Commonly and mostly used in the very graceful age of Marie Antoinette. Rococo style rooms are ornated and decorated with sculptures, ornamental mirrors, tapestry complementing architecture, reliefs and gilded frames.

Then Thomas Chippendale transforms English furniture through his adaptation and refinement of Rococo. By 1785, Rococo went out of fashion, replaced by the order and seriousness of the Neoclassical period, with its delicate and simple lines, and by Regency style.

Despite Jane Austen’s lack of description about furniture, all this styles are shown by the BBC mini-series and Bright. We can see *objects d’art* inside Netherfield Park, Longbourn, and Pemberley. Rooms at Pemberley are filled with gilded furnishings, marble, brocades and damasks. It is one of the most luxurious houses in England. Here two scenes from the BBC:



## MUSIC ANALYSIS

In Jane Austen's novel we learn that people dance, and play music, but we don't know what they dance and which composers they like.

Great Britain witnesses a period of unprecedented prosperity in 18<sup>th</sup> century. This is the result of a comparative stable democratic government and a flourishing international trade with a growing number of colonies, supported by trusted financial institutions.

Consequently, rich people have time and money to visit opera houses, music clubs or pleasant gardens such as Vauxhal or Ranelagh in London, to hear the latest concertos and songs.

Thus England becomes the vibrant musical centre of Europe to which, not surprisingly, a great wave of continental musicians emigrate to seek fame and fortune. Amongst these there is the great Frederick Handel. At that time Bach is already one of the most important composer in the world, but Jane Austen doesn't explain anything .

The two film directors have decided not to pay attention to those composers. They have used a sound track, written on purpose, in order to stress some special romantic moments. Because it is very easy, with the help of music, to make the audience fall victim of the identification, and to manipulate it.

Bertolt Brecht has always fought against this kind of music in theatre and cinema, because the audience becomes a sort of passive one, which believes whatever the film director likes.

This is the reason why the two filmic versions opted for modern music,  
written for the films.



