

AUSTEN'S *EMMA* ON SCREEN: ARTICULATING ADAPTATION, IRONY AND SOCIAL CRITICISM

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This discussion aims at analyzing two audiovisual adaptations of Jane Austen's *Emma*, considering the theoretical and critical articulation between the process of adaptation and irony. The initial hypothesis was that much of the irony in Austen's novel tended to get lost in the process of adaptation. The results of the investigation, however, demonstrate that in this specific case, the adapters were successful in the recreation of irony, a discursive strategy that is characteristic of Jane Austen's literary style, and responsible for materializing the multiplicity of voices and critical positions in the novel. As a consequence, both adaptations constitute creative dialogues with the social and historical criticism inherent in the novel *Emma*.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Audiovisual Adaptation. Irony. Social Criticism. *Emma*. Jane Austen

Introduction

The 1990s definitely consolidated Jane Austen as a success on screen, both cinema and television, at least to the extent that successful means “marketable” and “profitable.” In 1995 four adaptations of her novels were released: *Pride and Prejudice* (miniseries produced by BBC and A&E, directed by Simon Langton); *Sense and Sensibility* (feature film produced by Mirage/Columbia, directed by Ang Lee); *Persuasion* (telefilm made by BBC and WGBH and later released as a feature film from Sony Picture Classics, directed by Roger Mitchell) and *Clueless* (feature film produced by Paramount, directed by Amy Heckerling), a contemporary loose adaptation of Austen's *Emma*. In 1996 the public had the chance to watch not only two other Austen adaptations, but two adaptations of the same novel, *Emma* – one produced by Miramax, directed by Douglas McGrath, and another by ITV and A&E, directed by Diarmuid Lawrence. In 1999 it was the time for another adaptation of Austen, this time *Mansfield Park*, directed by Patricia Rozema, to be

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shown on the big screen. In 2005, the audience had the chance to appreciate Joe Wright's adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, starring Keira Knightley and Mathew MacFadyen as Elizabeth and Darcy, respectively. In 2009 the BBC launched a miniseries of *Emma*, adapted by Sandy Welch. Another adaptation of *Emma* came out in 2020, directed by Autumn de Wilde. And the list may go on.

Considering the scope of the present discussion, the aim is to focus on two adaptations of *Emma*: *Clueless* (1995), by Amy Heckerling, and the 1996 English version directed by Diarmuid Lawrence. Interestingly, the headlines of some reviews written when these films came out illustrate the extent of both success and fuss that the transposition of Austen to screen did bring: "Jane Austen for the Nineties" (*The New Criterion*, September, 1995); "How did a 200-year-old novel become the British TV sensation of the year?" (*Listener*, August 31, 1996); "Austen Found: Hollywood Rediscovered the 19th-Century Writer" (*Washington Post*, December 10, 1995); "No longer Clueless about Jane Austen's Clout" (*Christian Science Monitor*, April 5, 1996); "A Surprise Film Hit About Rich Teen-Age Girls" (*The New York Times*, July 24, 1995); "It's Austenmania: Why Jane Austen film adaptations are turning the writer into a nineties phenomenon" (*Radio Times*, November 23-26, 1996).

Actually, the relationship between Jane Austen and adaptation dates from a more distant past. In *Jane Austen: The Novels*, Nicholas Marsh comments on the Austen family habit of both reading aloud Austen's own writings, and of using them for the performance of amateur dramatic productions, during which Austen could better "visualize" the appropriateness and alignment between characterization and voice, for instance (1998, p. 226-227). In one of her letters, Austen complains of her mother's inability to adequately reproduce the dialogue in *Pride and Prejudice*:

Our second evening's reading to Miss Benn had not pleased me so well, but I believe something must be attributed to my mother's too rapid way of getting on: and though she perfectly understands the characters herself, she cannot speak as they ought. (apud MARSH, 1998, p. 227).

I believe one can consider these moments as somehow marking the beginning of the relationship between Austen and adaptation; such "family happenings" do provide a significant illustration of the potentialities of Austen's texts to be dramatized, to be enacted; among these, her use of dialogue – woven through wit, humor, irony – and her precise sense of characterization, so as to create vivid characters the reader immediately recognizes, at the same time that she plays with romantic stereotypes, thus also making readers deceive themselves in their hasty predictions.

In “Jane Austen Adapted” Andrew Wright (1975) traces a genealogy of Austen adaptations, considering both the frequency with which her novels have been re-told, thus condensed and abridged for school children, or school reading, and also how often they have been transformed into plays, series, musicals and film (by the time Wright published his article, only 1940-*Pride and Prejudice* had been adapted as a film). Wright provides a relevant annotated list of adaptations, which includes school editions, abridgments, sequels, dramatizations and performances based on Austen’s work. In one of the examples he considers, a retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* (1962), Joan Macintosh, the adapter, summarizes Austen’s literary universe thus: “Jane Austen’s six novels are straightforward love stories, with happy endings, good plots, and a strong respect for domestic virtues” (apud WRIGHT, 1975, p. 424). As one may conclude, in re-telling Austen, that must have been the aspects considered and privileged by Macintosh. And yet, even if one agrees with her estimation of Austen, one must leave room to consider that Austen is not so straightforward as that; neither is she only that. A key passage in *Northanger Abbey* is representative of Austen’s view of the function of the novelist: to depict “the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, [...] conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language” (AUSTEN, 1994, p. 25).

These considerations already offer an introductory parameter for a further investigation of what happens to Austen in these 1990s television and filmic adaptations. One of the conclusions that Wright reaches, for instance, after analyzing several adaptations of Austen, is that “the closer the rendering to the words of Jane Austen the better” (WRIGHT, 1975, p. 439). He praises a 1942-theatre production of *Pride and Prejudice* (an adaptation by Anne Louise Coulter Martens, published under the pseudonym of Jane Kendall, at the Chicago Community Theatre) on the basis of faithfulness as well: “this unpretentious *Pride and Prejudice* recommends itself by a large degree of faithfulness to the original that is the hallmark of successful adaptation” (WRIGHT, 1975, p.436).

This matter of faithfulness to the original is a rather problematic principle when one deals with adaptation, mainly when the author in question is Jane Austen, whose ironic discourse constitutes a challenge to the screen. A good example of how faithfulness to the original may actually provoke a reverse effect is provided by John Caughie (1997) in “Small pleasures: adaptation and the past in British film and television.” He considers Jane Austen’s famous opening of *Pride and Prejudice* – “It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” – words which, in the novel, are ironically uttered by the narrator. Due to the challenge posited for the adaptation of this opening, that sets the whole ironic tone of the novel, but at the same time unwilling to lose the chance of using Austen’s famous words, adapters of plays, series, and films – also perhaps moved by a sense of faithfulness to Austen – tend

to transfer the narrator's speech, in this specific case of *Pride and Prejudice*, to the mouth of Austen's character Elizabeth Bennet, the novel's lively and intelligent heroine. In so doing, as Caughie aptly asserts, "[the transference] assigns to [her] a knowledge of her social and historical situation (...) which in the novel is shared between author and reader over the heads of the characters" (CAUGHIE, 1997, p. 45).

Bearing these issues in mind, in dealing with adaptations, a crucial question is, what exactly do critics mean when they talk about fidelity to the original? Do they mean fidelity to the words used in the novel? To the themes and characters portrayed? To the sense of pastness? To the ideology at work in the prior text? To the nuances of tone the author adopts? Indeed, a more revealing reading of adaptations might result from the consideration of the peculiarities inherent to the forms – film/literature – and from the consequences and effects arising from the cuts and additions to a film adapted.

In "Adaptation," Dudley Andrew (1992) discusses the concept of transposition of one medium into another in relation to the matter of interpretation. He remarks that "in a strong sense adaptation is the appropriation of meaning from a prior text" (ANDREW, 1992, p. 421). This appropriation of meaning has several gradations: it may vary from, in one extreme, a relation of fidelity to the "original" text, or it may have a relation of simply "referring," or alluding to, the earlier text, in the other extreme (ANDREW, 1992, p. 420). In any case, the process of adaptation not only involves "appropriation of a prior meaning," but selection, choice, addition, cuts, and certainly an interpretation as well as modification of the material to be translated and represented in the other medium. Such aspects are responsible for locating adaptation at a crosscutting of dialogues, which are enacted and actualized among different authors, different texts, different audiences, different cultures and different times.

Appropriation is a key term in Julie Sanders's (2006) discussion of adaptation, already announced in the title of her book, *Adaptation and appropriation*. Aligned with scholars who view adaptation in a broader context of intertextual studies, such as Linda Hutcheon (2006) and Robert Stam (2006), Sanders considers adaptation and appropriation as manifestations of intertextuality. As she claims: "The processes of adaptation and appropriation [...] are in many respects a sub-section of the over-arching practice of intertextuality" (SANDERS, 2006, p. 17). Hutcheon (2006, p. 8) describes adaptation as the transposition of a work of art to another medium; as a creative and interpretative act of appropriation; as an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted text. Notice the relevance Hutcheon also gives to adaptation as transposition, appropriation and intertextuality. Robert Stam, a respected scholar of Bakhtinian studies, has also argued on the relevance of intertextuality and dialogism for the investigation of adaptation. Drawing on the impact of poststructuralist and cultural studies for the study of narratology –

adaptation included –, Stam (2008, p. 8-9) demonstrates how intertextuality reshaped notions of originality and copy; organic unity and fragmentation. He claims that in a poststructuralist context, “adaptation can be seen as an orchestration of discourses, talents and tracks, a ‘hybrid’ construction mingling different media and discourses and collaborations” (STAM, 2008, p. 9).

In the investigation that follows, in which a period piece (*Emma*, 2006) and a contemporary adaptation (*Clueless*, 2005) are analyzed, the identification of the type of adaptation the reader/viewer is working with certainly provides a relevant basis for a discussion of the effects that the adapted text creates. For any adaptation constitutes nothing but *a reading, an interpretation* of a certain text. In this sense, the process of adaptation usually involves, in Benjamin’s words, going beyond the “question of representing the written work in relation to [its] time,” so as to also “bring to representation the time that knows them – that is our time – in the time when they originated” (BENJAMIN, in JAUSS, 1992, p. 165). In dealing with adaptations of Austen’s novels, because “the concerns at the center of [her] plots – sex, romance, and money” – as Troost and Greenfield say, “are central concerns in our era,” (1998, p. 3), these adaptations are also perhaps more symptomatic “of our own moment in time than about Austen’s writing.” As they conclude, “[i]n watching them, we watch ourselves” (1998, p. 11).

Significantly, Douglas McGrath (screenwriter and director of Miramax *Emma*), though recognizing Austen’s humor, and the sparkling, vivacious quality of *Emma*, attributes the novel’s timeless theme to what he considers as the love-story narrative: “For all the old dresses and the horses and the carriages, at the heart of it, all it’s about is trying to find the right person to spend your life with. And that’s all anybody cares about anyway – after hunger and illness. I would say it’s number three on the wish list” (in MASTERS, 1995). Austen’s detailed realism and criticism of Pre-Victorian society – constructed mainly through her uses of irony – is substituted by romance, Hollywood love-stories.

These considerations can lead the reader/spectator to think once more about the association between adaptation and irony, and about the distinction between story (the “what-component” in narratives) and discourse (the “how,” the process of construction of narratives). In his discussion on adaptation Brian McFarlane (1996) makes a distinction between what he calls “transfer” and “adaptation proper.” Transfer, as he explains, refers to “those elements of the original novel which are transferable because not tied to one or other semiotic system – that is, essentially, *narrative*; the latter refers to “those elements which involve intricate processes of adaptation because their effects are closely tied to the semiotic system in which they are manifested – that is, *enunciation*” (McFARLANE, 1996, p. 20). In my view, the way Austen uses irony enables one to locate it halfway between narrative and enunciation. For there are certain uses of irony in her novels – as for instance, the verbal ironies present in the characters’ dialogues – that are perfectly

transferable, whereas those ironies which are rooted in the narrator's discourse – thus belonging to the level of enunciation – must be adapted to the screen. Due to the difficulty that this kind of irony posits to filmmakers, or perhaps due to their choices, that align with profit and the film industry, they generally ignore it, by downplaying Austen's ironic touches at the expense of romantic plots.

Adaptation and irony

Let me raise now some relevant theoretical issues concerning ironic discourse and its materialization in a different audiovisual medium. Irony has been traditionally defined by theorists as a figure “that says one thing and means/intends another” (BOOTH, 1974, p.7; p.34). Ironic structure is also said to be generated by the contrast between what is said and what is done: as Scholes, for instance, explains, in ironic discourse “words are allied with appearances and deeds with reality” (1982, p.76). Therefore, irony plays with the incongruity between surfaces and realities, the differences between words and deeds. This incongruity may be expressed through a juxtaposition of narrator's words (saying one thing) and characters' actions (contradicting what the narrator says); it may also be reflected by means of the differences between a character's words and her/his actions, that is, between what s/he says and her/his actual intentions; it may be further actualized through discrepancies among different voices, such as those of the implied author's, the narrator's, the characters', and what the reader believes to be the “true” voice, or at least, the most reliable voice.

In Austen's fiction, as for instance, in a novel like *Emma*, irony may be found in connection with other literary devices: irony and point of view (most of the narrative is filtered through Emma, but as she constitutes a fallible filter, the reader is deceived, with/like her, through a great part of the narrative); irony and plot (again, because Emma is a fallible filter the text of *Emma* is structurally ironic, that is, alternative interpretations are called for retrospectively); irony and characterization, or, to use Booth's term, “ironic portraits” (1974, p. 137-174). In *Emma* the character Mrs. Elton would certainly exemplify that. This is one way of dealing with irony – irony as a verbal, structural, and linguistic device. But much more is at stake in the attribution and interpretation of irony.

In *Irony's edge: the theory and politics of irony*, Linda Hutcheon proposes a reading of irony that combines a formalist analysis with politics. She explains that “the ‘scene’ of irony involves relations of power based in relations of communication” (1995, p. 2). In this way, dealing with ironic discourse inevitably means dealing with issues concerning “inclusion and exclusion, intervention and evasion” (HUTCHEON, 1995, p.2). In other words, the use of irony is intimately connected with relations of authority and power, in which questions of speech and silence are involved. As she explains:

Because irony (...) happens in something called 'discourse,' its semantic and syntactic dimensions cannot be considered separately from the social, historical and cultural aspects of its contexts of deployment and attribution. Issues of authority and power are encoded in that notion of 'discourse' today in much the same way that, in earlier times, they were encoded in the word 'rhetoric' (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 17).

The expression *ironic discourse* already and inevitably invites a discussion of the relation between irony and context, the situation of interpreting, the background of assumptions, reading experience and knowledge the reader brings to the text. This relevant notion is shared by Robert Scholes in "A semiotic approach to irony in drama and fiction," in which he emphasizes that, "of all figures [irony] is the one that must always take us out of the text and into codes, contexts and situations" (1982, p. 76-7). Unlike metaphor and metonymy, Scholes argues, which are "expressed and understood primarily at the semantic level of discourse, irony depends to an extraordinary degree on the pragmatics of situation" (1982, p. 76). For irony is a strategy and mode of discourse that *does* things through speech, as the title of Hutcheon's book – *Irony's edge* – illustrates. A relevant consequence of this is the fact that "in speech, irony will often be signaled by the non-verbal parts of utterance (intonation or gesture), while metaphor and metonymy are virtually independent of these features" (SCHOLES, 1982, p. 76). This pragmatic principle of irony applies substantially to an analysis of films, not only due to their dramatic property, but due to their potentiality to materialize aspects of body communication and voice, such as intonation, gestures, looks, whispers, silences. Such aspects are relevant to the extent that they affect other participants of the discourse situation (target and interpreter), i.e., they occur as ways of either relating to, or evading from, others.

Hutcheon develops further the association between irony and context both in her discussion of the semantic characteristics of irony (irony as a "relational," "inclusive," and "differential" figure) and in her analysis of the role of "discursive communities" to make irony happen. For the purposes of this essay, I will concentrate on the dialogic association between the relational aspect of irony and the question of discursive communities. Hutcheon explains "relational" as follows:

Irony is a relational strategy in the sense that it operates not only between meanings (said, unsaid) but between people (ironists, interpreters, targets). Ironic meaning comes into being as the consequence of a relationship, a dynamic, performative bringing together of different meaning-makers, but also of different meanings, first, in order to create something new, and (...) to endow it with the critical edge of judgment (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 58).

That reveals the impossibility of discussing the semantic features of irony dissociated from its pragmatic and communicative function. One aspect inevitably entails the other: not only are different, plural meanings involved in the reading of irony; different meaning-makers – and hence, different contexts of attribution – are also called into question. The fact that irony is a relational strategy means that it happens through a “culturally shaped process” (HUTCHEON, 1995, p.89), in the sense that it is conditioned by “the particularities of time and place, of immediate social situation and general culture” (HUTCHEON, 1995, p.91). The reader/viewer, represented in Hutcheon through what she names “discursive communities,” plays a crucial role in the attribution, interpretation and understanding of irony. This is how she defines the expression: “I want to define these ‘discursive communities’ in general by the complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and communicative strategies” (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 91).

Hutcheon believes that it is not irony that creates the relationship between ironist and interpreter, but instead, “it is the community that comes first and that, in fact, *enables* the irony to happen” (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 89). This is a relevant “corrective” issue in previous theories about irony that attribute the comprehension (or ‘failure’ of comprehension) of ironic discourse to matters of interpreter competence (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 97). Booth, for instance, talks about “the building of amiable communities” – between ironist and readers – resulting from the process of reading ironies, a process characterized, according to him, by the emotion of “joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits” (BOOTH, 1974, p. 28). For Hutcheon, however, it is not irony that links ironist and reader in a “communal” way; rather, it is the community that precedes, thus determining, the process of ironic comprehension: “irony (...) might come into being because the communal values and beliefs already exist” (HUTCHEON, 1995, p. 95).

Adapting *Emma* to screen: Diarmuid Lawrence’s visual rendition

What are the effects and consequences of the consideration of these issues when we think about the transposition of irony from page to screen, that is, specifically in this case, when we think about the adaptations of Austen’s novels? Let me start the discussion by taking into account Diarmuid Lawrence’s 1996-ITV/A&E version of *Emma*. The way the film starts – with a moon-night image in which thieves are dimly shown (though we can perfectly hear the noises made by the hens and by a shooting) stealing hens from Hartfield – already makes the viewer question, for some seconds, whether that is really an Austen film.

In her reading of “Class” in Austen, Juliet McMaster says that “Dickens might give us scenes of the unleashed fury of the mob in the Gordon riots or the French Revolution; but in Austen’s novels, by and large, law and order prevail” (1998, p. 128). I have the impression that already in Austen this ‘law’ and ‘order’ might

prevail only in appearance; Austen's irony and implicit tensions undermine such an order, contradict its neatness, thus inviting a careful look into the *double-dealings* of narration at large.

In the novel *Emma*, for instance, the reference to 'pilfering' comes in the very last page, as follows: "Mrs Weston's poultry-house was robbed one night of all the turkies – evidently by the ingenuity of man. Other poultry-yards in the neighbourhood also suffered. – Pilfering was *housebreaking* to Mr. Woodhouse's fears" (AUSTEN, 1993, p. 313). But the novel shows other scenes and several gradations of poverty as well: when Emma and Harriet visit the poor and sick; and when Harriet fearfully observes a group of dispossessed and helpless gypsies. Besides, as Mary-Elizabeth Tobin shows in her reading of impoverished gentlewomen in *Emma*, this is a novel in which Austen "explores (...) [women's] depression over their loss of social status and the shame they experience at all the small indignities accompanying their social exclusion" (p. 1988, p. 415). Miss Taylor, Mrs. Goddard, Miss Nash, Mrs. and Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax are examples of such impoverished gentlewomen. What the film does, actually, is to bring the scenes of poverty to the foreground, or even when they appear in the background (throughout the film servants are shown as if they were merely part of the decor), the film more often gives them more visibility, perhaps more emphatically or explicitly, than Austen does.

The hen-stealing scene, for instance, is chosen to provide the framework for the film's construction: the film ends the way it starts, with an exterior night shot in which hens are also stolen. This framework is highly ironic, not only because it reminds us of the frailty of that apparent order, but mainly because of the subject of Mr. Knightley's speech at the next-to-last scene in the film (a scene that has no equivalent in the novel, being thus an added scene), a speech where he emphasizes "continuation and stability." The alternating of this shot (taking place inside the 'cozy' *Donwell* Abbey – notice the word connotation – with people eating, drinking, celebrating, dancing) with that of the thieves stealing hens in Knightley's poultry-yard generates the irony for the viewer.

Actually, scenes of social disruption, showing a frame beyond that of Austen, constitute a remarkable feature of this version. Immediately after the opening shot, there is a sequence of the Westons' wedding; on the way to church, the camera *takes advantage* not only to register the dialogue between Emma and her father inside the carriage (we listen to Mr. Woodhouse complaining, "Six good hens and now Miss Taylor," a juxtaposition that also sets the ironic tone) but opens the field of vision so as to show workers, common, poor people in the village. The visual rendition of a (perhaps) larger Highbury – we also see these common workers in the village when Mr. Elton leaves to Bath in search of a wife; servants and their work are shown during the picking of strawberries, during the Box-Hill picnic, during the preparation of food for the harvest-dinner at the end of the film – informs, in a wider spectrum, both on the quantity of servants upon whom the landed gentry

depended, and on the inequalities and injustices of that kind of society, in which issues of class, money and manners – as Austen’s novels, certainly with more subtlety already reveal – play a crucial role.

Another significant way of generating irony in this film is related to the visual rendition of Emma’s imagination as to the love stories she invents; that is, the film succeeds in actually showing some of the events, conjectures and guesses as filtered through Emma’s mind, as results of her propensity to creating stories (we already know from the novel that she constitutes a fallible filter), stories which, as the film develops, do not align with what the narration at large is showing and telling. The visual rendition of Emma’s imagination is very relevant not only to provide the character with psychological depth – as Kate Beckinsale, the actress who played Emma in the British version says, “The main reason for her deep obsession with other people’s relationships is that she’s so stultified in her environment” (LYALL, 1997, p. 35; p. 39) – but also to create a link with the viewer through irony. The film, in reproducing the novel’s sub-plot of mystery involving the secret engagement of Frank and Jane Fairfax, invites a close reading of its discourse, rather than its story.

As in the novel, when even before having been to the village, the narrator ironically says that “Mr. Frank Churchill was one of the boasts of Highbury” (AUSTEN, 1993, p. 9), the film also provides a meaningful context, differently from the novel, to introduce Frank to the viewer, and to most characters in the film, before he arrives there in person. Such an introduction is provided both by a portrait of Frank, hung on the wall in the Westons’ room, and by Mr. Weston’s playing the role of father-narrator, as he tells Mr. Elton – and the viewer – about his son’s history. In the first case, when the information about Frank is mediated through his portrait, Emma looks at the picture and exclaims, “And he is very handsome.” To which Mr. Elton answers, “Appearances may often deceive”. This worn-out saying acquires a highly ironic overtone in the whole context of the film, in which matters of appearance and reality, and the incongruity between them, will be responsible for the general ironic pattern of the narrative. At the end of the Christmas dinner, when all the guests are returning to their homes, Emma (this time alone) looks once more at Frank’s picture, and by now the picture materializes into the very person, Frank Churchill, who gallantly kisses Emma’s hand and actually speaks to her: “Miss Woodhouse, we meet at last.” The first introduction of Frank to the viewer already creates, on one level, an expectation of a romantic attachment between him and Emma; but because the whole scene is *mediated through* Emma’s imaginist tendencies – which the viewer soon learns to be ‘fallible’ – both Emma and the viewer will be deceived.

Like the novel, but of course using peculiarly cinematic tools, the film thus succeeds in subverting pre-conceived notions about stereotypical romantic couples and relationships. Besides, the use of a portrait to introduce Frank is also consonant with the emphasis given, in Austen’s novel, to a world of *signs* (as for instance,

Emma's drawing of Harriet's sketch, the charades, the conundrums, the letter-puzzles, word-games scattered throughout her narrative), and to their precariousness to actually convey stable meanings, thus always giving rise to misunderstandings and irony. To develop further the ironic nuance of Mr. Elton's statement "Appearances may often deceive," it is important to highlight, for instance, that he is thoroughly unaware of Emma's blindness concerning his interest in her. Thus the reader/viewer, in their 'superior knowledge,' may attribute at least three different meanings to the above statement: 1. Frank may not be in reality what the portrait indicates; 2. Though Mr. Elton appears (from Emma's perspective) to be interested in Harriet, he is interested in Emma; 3. Though Emma appears (from Mr. Elton's perspective) to be interested in him, she is interested in his being interested in Harriet. On their carriage-ride back home – when Mr. Elton finally declares his love to Emma – the "appearances may often deceive" notion will have its first revelation to Emma.

Adapting *Emma* to 20th-century times and politics: Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*

A first great distinction between Lawrence's *Emma* (as well as McGrath's) and *Clueless* is that related to the acknowledgment of the 'original' source, Austen's novel, in the construction of the adapted text, and consequently the question of faithfulness to what they consider Austen's world and values to be. Whereas the period-piece adaptations make great efforts to reconstruct and recreate Austen's past village life in pre-industrial England in minute details – attention is given to historical locations, accurate period decor, authentic dances, period music, food, costumes, hats, wigs, make-up and hair design (see, for instance, the books by Sue Birtwistle and Susie Conklin *The making of Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and *The making of Emma* (1996), which attest, through research and consultation with specialists, the 'historical authenticity' of such films) – a contemporary loose adaptation like *Clueless* does not even mention Jane Austen in the credits. This lack of concern with origins and authorship (at least as it relates to Austen) is decisive for a consideration of *Clueless* and the relations it creates with both Austen's novel and the allegedly faithful adaptations. Actually, Heckerling's film illustrates a case of *adaptation as appropriation* – in Sanders' terms – since the film signals "a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (SANDERS, 2006, p. 26).

In "Austen found: Hollywood rediscovers the 19th-century writer," Kim Masters (1995) comments on the fact that "*Clueless* was a sleeper hit, grossing more than \$ 55 million domestically". The reading of the reviews and articles about these films usually shows the opposing opinions that *Clueless*, for instance, gave rise to: in "So Genteel, So Scheming, So Austen" Janet Maslin (1996) refers to *Clueless* as "a deliriously pop version" of *Emma*; in "Remarks on Jane Austen and the Period Film" Gabrielle Finnane (1996) qualifies *Clueless* as "a bright

contemporary translation of *Emma*” (*Metro*, p. 6); in “The Dumbing of *Emma*” Anthony Lane (1996) talks about “the daffy shape of “*Clueless*,” a variation on the theme of “*Emma*,” in “‘*Emma*’ Rings True To Jane Austen’s Novel” David Sterrit (1996) considers *Clueless* as “the most original of them all [he is referring to other Austen adaptations].” In “The Austen versions: recent films” Jocelyn Harris (1996) refers to *Clueless* as a “brilliant and funny movie” (p. 429), whereas Donald Lyons (1996) complains that “[Austen’s] masterpiece, *Emma*, was cutely shrunk to comic-book size this summer by Amy Heckerling in *Clueless* and is slated for proper adaptation soon” (“Review of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Film Comment*, v. 32, n. 1, 1996, p. 41). Many other reviews would also be illustrating of such different viewpoints concerning *Clueless*, but what is clearly at stake in the critics’ negative evaluations of Heckerling’s film is the question of (lack of) “truth” and “fidelity” to Austen’s world – as the opposition between “masterpiece” (Austen’s *Emma*) and “comic-book size” (Heckerling’s *Clueless*), as well as the expression “proper adaptation” in Lyons’ comment reveals; what they mean is that without a *historical authentication* that may link *Clueless* to Austen, this is merely a pop version, more mass-culture product than the other films. Such a consideration is also a consequence of the fact that *Clueless* is a film originally conceived to be addressed to teenagers, having its literary and filmic roots, as Esther Sonnet (1999) in her analysis “From *Emma* to *Clueless*” informs, “in the critically despised ‘teenpic’ genre that emerged in the mid-1950s as a result of the fragmentation of mass cinema audiences into age-specific consumer groups” (1999, p. 51).

These notions actually disguise the fact that the other supposedly “proper adaptations” are also remakes and aesthetic replays and are also inserted within a context of mass, popular culture. As Sonnet argues, “*Clueless* proposes a quite different relation to its textual ‘origin.’ It does not signal itself as ‘past’ and therefore does not cue in the ‘gentrification effect I have argued typifies those ‘literary’ adaptations that make up ‘highbrow’ popular cinema. Instead, the resolutely contemporary setting of *Clueless* plays as much *against* its source as it does with it” (1999, p. 60). “Play” is actually a key concept in the discussion of *Clueless*, for what it does is to play with the possibility of making a film with different textual strata, not only semantically, but historically and culturally speaking – consisting of residues from different times and places, even if these are not always explicitly shown. Austen’s *Emma*, in *Clueless*, consists of a quotation, an ironic quotation. In other words, Heckerling’s film illustrates the relationship between adaptation, appropriation and intertextuality defended by Hutcheon (2006), Stam (2006) and Sanders (2006). Interestingly, though in different places, these scholars were simultaneously elaborating on adaptation in somehow similar terms.

Because *Clueless* is not a period adaptation, it is crowded with references to themes and topics that have gained prominence in contemporary debates: drugs, adolescence, sexuality, virginity, divorce, violence, ecology, Greenpeace, Amnesty

International, breast cancer, education, stereotypes, consumerism, fashion. But none of these is discussed; on the contrary, they are merely alluded to, or literally, but loosely, quoted, thus also constituting ironic quotations in the film's context. As the main setting for *Clueless* is a high-society high school (or should I say a shopping mall?) in Beverly Hills, contemporary Los Angeles and times, very often the school board shows words like "discrimination," "suffragette," "subjugation," "poverty," and "destitution." The irony is that these topics remain as distant as possible from the students; they exist as mere signs, words written on the board, or on characters' (such as Josh's) T-shirts.

As *Clueless* represents a considerable departure from Austen's *Emma* and from the "more faithful" versions of the novel, it illustrates in my view a kind of ironic vocabulary that aligns with Richard Rorty's conception of the ironist as discussed in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. He describes an ironist as a person who "has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses (...)" (1989, p.73). The ironist thus expresses herself through *redescription*, through "playing the new off against the old" (RORTY, 1989, p. 73). In opposing irony to common sense – "to be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative vocabularies" (RORTY, 1989, p. 74) – Rorty characterizes the ironist as one whose vocabulary is contingent, fragile, doubtful, always subject to change. These notions make the reading of irony in *Clueless* at least twice as complex because considering that to re-describe is to ironize, what *Clueless* does is to re-describe an already highly ironic text, a fact that makes it doubly ironic.

The playful and ironic tone of *Clueless* is pervasive from the beginning to the end of the film. The use of Cher as a first-person narrator is decisive for the play of incongruities between verbal material and the images shown. Cher's voice-off at the beginning of the film, introduces it thus: "So OK, you're probably thinking, 'Is this, like a Noxema commercial, or what?'" But seriously, I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl. I mean I get up, I brush my teeth, and I pick out my school clothes." The equality suggested by Cher between the film (*Clueless*) and a commercial is already symptomatic of the incorporation the film makes of other communication technologies through references to, and quotations from, other media, like: 1. Television – cartoons (considered trivial), the news (serious), advertisements; 2. Video – as when Cher and Christian (that would correspond to Frank Churchill in *Emma*) watch Stanley Kubrick's 1960 *Spartacus*. In *Clueless* Christian is a homosexual and the scene shown from *Spartacus* is one that, according to Gabrielle Finnane, was censored in the original release of the film because of its covert homosexual implications (1996, p. 106); 3. The question of cinema, literature, theatre, adaptation—two examples are revealing: the first relates to Cher's quoting of Shakespeare's verse "Rough winds do shake the darling buds

of May but thy eternal summer shall not fade” and puts it in Miss Giest’s pigeon-hole (Cher is also a matchmaker in this version). Dionne asks her whether she has written that and Cher says it’s a famous quote ... from Cliff’s notes. The other example refers to Heather, Josh’s girlfriend, when she mentions Hamlet saying “To thine own self be true.” The dialogue goes like this:

CHER: Ah, no, uh, Hamlet didn’t say that.

HEATHER: I think that I remember Hamlet accurately.

CHER: Well, I remember Mel Gibson accurately,
and he didn’t say that. That Polonius guy did.

These two instances reveal how the literary text – most of times considered superior both to the criticism written about it and its adaptations – is at present mediated by mass-culture experiences and diverse cultural discourses. Cher remembers Shakespeare’s quote not from her reading of Shakespeare, but from Cliff’s notes. Likewise, she remembers *Hamlet* not from her reading of Shakespeare’s play, but from her memory of Mel Gibson playing Hamlet. These examples also illustrate the lack of concern with origins and authorship already commented above in relation to the film *Clueless* itself, in whose credits Jane Austen’s novel does not appear.

To analyze further the matter of *Clueless* as constituting an ironic re-description of Austen’s *Emma* I would like to concentrate now on what I consider to be a very substantial instance of ironic quotation from Austen’s text. I refer to the moment when Cher takes a picture of Tai, and Elton (in *Clueless* “Elton” is a first name, and together with “Cher” and “Dionne” allude to names of artists) asks her for a sample and sticks it in his locker. The scene directly relates to the one in Austen’s novel, when Emma draws a portrait of Harriet, and Mr. Elton praises Emma’s ability as drawer and painter. Several implications arise from that change: for one thing, *taking photographs* as a substitute for *drawing/painting* is a way of signaling the move from a so-called high-artistic technique and expression (drawing/painting) to a mass-popular activity (photography), that lacks (at least in Cher’s case as photographer) the standards of “great art”. This scene has reminded me of Walter Benjamin’s much quoted text on “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction”, mainly the passage dealing with photography:

(...) for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense (BENJAMIN, 1992, p. 669-670).

That is why the reader of Austen's *Emma* cannot help laughing at this scene which, to a certain extent, enables one to think about the whole matter of artistic reproduction, including the film itself – *Clueless* – as an ultimate and concrete attempt at re-producing, in another place and time, Austen's *Emma*. In the novel's context, the reader may admit Mr. Elton's praise of Emma's painting – which still possesses what Benjamin calls "aura" – "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (BENJAMIN, 1992, p. 668) – the element that attests to the authority, uniqueness, and singularity of the artistic piece. But in *Clueless*, when Elton says he has kept Tai's picture because it was taken by Cher, the viewer immediately notices a parodic commentary on the misunderstandings in Austen's novel (which somehow begin with Emma's painting of Harriet). The film at this moment actually illustrates the historical and cultural gap between *Emma* and *Clueless*, whose title already alludes to a superficial world, where surfaces and style take precedence over content. The passage from Austen's novel is turned into a joke in Heckerling's film; after all, in an ordinary context (as the one in the film) a picture is much more important for what it contains (mainly when the theme is women) than by the fact of whom has taken it. Subverting this logic conclusion is a way the film finds to establish an inevitable difference in terms of Austen's world and ours – one in which "the notion of the original as rare, single and valuable (in aesthetic or commercial terms) is called into question" (HUTCHEON, 1989, p. 93).

This scene I have selected from Heckerling's film also serves to illustrate the semantic features of ironic discourse proposed by Hutcheon: relational, inclusive and differential. Not only does *Clueless* reproduce the ironies present in Austen's text, but in adapting them to our contemporary time, i.e., in *re-describing* them, the film ends up enlarging such an ironic discourse so as to encompass other issues not present in Austen's time. In watching *Clueless*, the viewer notices that many of its ironic effects are actually derived from the parodic relations the film creates with Austen's textual universe. Such relations, however, are not always explicitly shown – they merely allude to Austen. In this sense, the relationship between said and unsaid meanings complement each other through this game of reference and allusion the adaptations make with Austen's *Emma*, and also through the cultural gap between the source and filmic texts.

Concluding notes

A basic hypothesis underlying this investigation resulted from a general premise that much of Jane Austen's irony seemed to get lost in the process of transposition from the novels to screen. This general supposition somehow clashed with the notion that irony – both as a discursive strategy and as a way of conceiving the world – is not restricted to verbal forms and expressions, being also available

and possible to the audio-visual medium. As the results of the analysis demonstrate, certain Austenian ironies are not only re-described and re-interpreted but also displaced to contemporary times.

The theoretical material on irony enabled me to verify the different ways in which irony manifests itself as a discursive device, as well as for what purposes and functions. As we all know, not only do (the) films constitute other texts, since they are mediated by our twenty-first century perceptions of life, but because of the difference of medium, irony is expressed in distinct ways in the films. A first general conclusion is that the filmic versions tend to emphasize the romantic relations at the expense of Austen's realist and critical depiction of pre-Victorian society. This fact aligns both with a commercial demand for love-story narratives and with the evidence that the romantic material belongs to the narrative level of discourse (differently from her ironic criticism of society, which is often attached to the narrator's discourse), being thus more easily translatable to screen.

Diarmuid Lawrence's/Andrew Davies's *Emma* is somehow successful in recreating Austen's ironical perspective to the audio-visual medium. Despite the changes the adapters make – i.e., what they add (such as the harvest-engagement scene), or what they change, the rearrangements they make in terms of plot, and also what they keep from the novel –, serve not only to provide the narrative with consistency and an articulation with Austen's world, but also to create irony in varied and substantial ways. Bearing this in mind, I consider the British version of *Emma* – with its attention given to the issue of class distinctions (by enacting the work of servants at several key moments), with the recognition of the relevance of the visual rendition of Emma's fantasies, with the articulation and dramatization of the Frank-Jane subplot – to constitute not only a convincing appraisal of Austen's novel, but to have been felicitous in its reflection, and even reproduction, through some details, of the nuances and competing meanings of Austen's literary ironies.

The pilfering scenes that provide the film's framework are significant to show what happens when something which can be read as 'light' irony in the novel is *visualized* in the film. In other words, based on these scenes, it is possible to make a very important point about the effect of translation in a language of a different order – from verbal to visual, from something which is read to something which is seen. In the novel, not only is the pilfering incident mentioned just at the end (thus only once, almost in passing), but its irony is light, or mild, being mainly concerned with Mr. Woodhouse's fears and nervous system. The robbery of his poultry-house, in the novel, functions as an appropriate, or convincing, pretext for him to accept Emma and Knightley's wedding in a more smooth way. In the film, the pilfering scenes become, quite literally, darker; they acquire a menacing tone that transcends the limits of Hartfield to suggest a larger social implication.

In Heckerling's *Clueless*, irony results from a process of *re-description* (in Rorty's sense of the term) of Austen's ironic vocabulary, as well as from the

intersection created between two worlds: pre-Victorian England, which is basically alluded by Heckerling's use of certain characters and episodes from *Emma*, and contemporary high American society. Relations of power deriving from the narrator/viewer knowing more than the characters in the film also occur in *Clueless*, but the sense of superiority, authority and power (held by both narrator and viewer) is diluted because the viewer here also feels like a target/victim of that ironic discourse.

The examples chosen for discussion in *Clueless* – the photography scene, the moments that ironize the obsession with consumerism (fashion, for instance), the references to a society saturated with technology and media, the lack of concern with origins and authorship – are all symptomatic of a world that is too much familiar to us, twenty-first century viewers of the film. The fact that Austen's readers, or even viewers of more faithful versions of *Emma*, are able to interpret such scenes in their intersection and dialogue with the world of Austen's novel, only favors the enlargement of these issues, by stretching irony's boundaries and contexts.

AZERÊDO, G. *Emma*, de Jane Austen, na tela: articulando adaptação, ironia e crítica social. **Itinerários**, Araraquara, n. 62, p. 59-77, jan./jun. 2026.

■ **RESUMO:** *Propomos a discussão de duas adaptações audiovisuais de Emma – a adaptação de Amy Heckerling, Clueless (1995), e a de Diarmuid Lawrence, Emma (1996), tendo como fundamento teórico-crítico a articulação entre o processo de adaptação e a ironia. A hipótese inicial era que muito da ironia no romance de Austen tendia a perder-se no processo de adaptação. Os resultados da investigação demonstram, no entanto, que, neste caso específico, os adaptadores obtiveram êxito na recriação da ironia, estratégia discursiva característica do estilo literário de Jane Austen e responsável por materializar a multiplicidade de vozes e posicionamentos críticos presentes no romance. Como consequência, ambas as adaptações constituem diálogos criativos com a crítica social e histórica inerente ao romance Emma.*

■ **PLAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Adaptação audiovisual. Ironia. Crítica social. Emma. Jane Austen*

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