

SCREENING JANE AUSTEN'S *NORTHANGER ABBEY*: ADAPTATION AS (MIS)INTERPRETATION

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- **ABSTRACT:** *Northanger Abbey* can be aesthetically defined as a metalinguistic and metafictional novel. The story of Catherine Morland, the novel's protagonist, is inseparable from her subjective characterization as a reader of Gothic literature. As such, in order to tell her story, the narrator also parodically reflects on the very process of reading and interpreting literary conventions. This elaborate construction of double discourse – telling a story and reflecting about the artifice of its construction – provides an instigating issue for analysis when the novel gets transposed to the screen. How does the cinema respond to Austen's innovating use of metafictional strategies? The purpose of this essay is to examine whether the potentiality of filmic language to create metafictional techniques finds resonance in this adaptation.
- **KEYWORDS:** Metafiction. Parody. Gothic. Film adaptation.

According to Andrew Davies, there is one writer who is almost perfect to adapt and that is Jane Austen. The screenwriter justifies his evaluation by saying that “in Austen everything works” (CARTMELL; WHELEHAN, 2007, p.248), a reference that encompasses her construction of well made plots and convincing dialogues, which he qualifies as sharp, witty, funny and dramatic. In adapting Austen, Davies also considers the fact that her “books are enormously well known by the people who admire her” (CARTMELL; WHELEHAN, 2007, p.244). So Davies is not alone in his admiration as a reader (adapter) of Austen.

Although one might initially agree with Davies as to Austen's mastery at composing plots and dialogues, there are other literary strategies in her fiction which are worth considering when examining her novels' transposition to screen. Irony¹ and metafiction constitute two substantial examples of literary resources that add complexity to her fiction and, consequently, to the process of its adaptation, since they very much depend on the narrator's discourse. According to Brian

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¹ Irony has already been the focus of my discussion in Azerêdo (2009).

McFarlane (1996), materials depending on the narrative discourse (differently from those situated on the level of story) tend to resist being adapted. At the same time, neglecting these aspects might eventually result in superficial adaptations, for, as we all know, the level of enunciation is responsible for endowing the narrative at large with ambiguity, discrepancy of meanings and social criticism. In Austen (and *Northanger Abbey* is as an example), irony may work together with parody and metafiction, thus generating a discourse which is intricate, double and highly critical of literary conventions. Bearing these initial considerations in mind, it is our purpose to analyze how Jon Jones (director) and Andrew Davies (screenwriter) adapted *Northanger Abbey* (2006) to screen. Our premise is that the presence of irony, parody and other metafictional elements in the novel is highly relevant for its significance, mainly as it concerns the protagonist's subjective characterization and the parodic dialogue the narrative establishes with the Gothic tradition. Considering the freedom and right the adaptation has to choose a line of interpretation to follow in the trans-coding process, but also the potential force the cinema possesses to respond to ironical and metafictional strategies, we will observe how this adaptation recreated Austen's universe, what choices and omissions were made in relation to the source literary text, and what consequences, in terms of meanings, resulted from the process.

The first point to be considered in Austen's novel is the reader's awareness, from the very first lines, that s/he is reading a novel which explicitly refers to a tradition of novel reading and novel writing. The initial lines of the first chapter, uttered by a third-person narrator, state: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (AUSTEN, 1994, p.1). Next to the end of the chapter the narrator concludes: "But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must happen and will happen to throw a hero in her way" (AUSTEN, 1994, p.5). These are lines that emphasize the metalinguistic function (JAKOBSON, 1995) of language, since they call the reader's attention to a code – in this case, a literary code. The terms "heroine" and "hero" belong to a context of fiction, thus, in using them, the narrator makes explicit the artifice of construction inherent in the narrative being read. The lines induce the reader to wonder what characterizes a heroine and why Catherine did not at first respond to the attributes of one (and the answer will soon be given by the novel). The reader also suspects that if the novel, despite Catherine's deficiencies (of beauty, intelligence and accomplishments), begins with a reference to her, then she will be the narrative's heroine, a guess which is confirmed in the second quotation above. Therefore, she will be a different heroine, a heroine that will undermine conventional features and introduce new ones. It is worth remarking that the exaggeration in the second quotation, referring to "the perverseness of forty

surrounding families” (AUSTEN, 1994, p.5) also ironically alludes to a tradition of stories (fairy tales, Gothic, sentimental) in which evil and obstacles are part of a known framework.

The fact is that, as we advance in our reading of *Northanger Abbey*, we become further aware of Austen's metafictional strategies, materialized in different levels: in the narrator's frequent references to codes – textual, literary, artistic at large; in the subjective characterization of the heroine (now we know for sure she is the novel heroine) as a reader of Gothic literature; in the parodic dialogue Austen promotes when inserting a Gothic background in her own literature, one whose aim is to get distanced from the Gothic tradition; in the ambiguous nature of the parody (HUTCHEON, 1985) Austen constructs, as both a strategy of negation and exclusion (counter-song) but also as an attempt to incorporate tradition, to articulate with it, even to pay homage to it.

Perhaps one of the most quoted passages in the novel is one in which the narrator exposes the snobbish attitude of those who despise novel reading, considering the activity too shallow and degrading:

I am no novel reader; I seldom look into novels; it is very well for a novel”. Such is the common cant. “And what are you reading, Miss –?” “Oh! It is only a novel!” replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. “It is only *Cecilia*, or *Camilla*, or *Belinda* [...]” (AUSTEN, 1994, p.25).

Contrary to that view, the narrator adopts a position to defend both novel writers and readers, and a significant response to that negative evaluation firstly comes in the reference to the pleasure Catherine and Isabella have when reading novels: “[...] and, if a rainy morning deprived them from other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up to read novels together. Yes, novels [...]” (AUSTEN, 1994, p.24). The passage goes on with the narrator claiming the need for writers to defend their own work, to value their own production: “Alas! If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard?” (AUSTEN, 1994, p.24). Again, the passage shows an overlapping of novel readers, thus exposing its metafictional nature: Catherine, the “different” heroine in Austen's novel (the one I am reading about) is also a reader of other heroines' stories.

The following defense the narrator makes of writers comes through an appraisal of novels and their relevant function in life. According to the narrator, a novel is

[...] in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the

happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language (AUSTEN, 1994, p.25).

It is a kind of statement that one would expect to find in a critical or theoretical book, rather than in a novel, mainly in the early 19th century (and it is relevant to remember that *Northanger Abbey* was written in the 1790s). However, as Patricia Waugh (1984, p.2) defines: “metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”. This context applies to *Northanger Abbey*, which incorporates other metafictional features mentioned by Waugh (1984, p.7 e p.10): “it deconstructs conventional assumptions about ‘plot’, ‘character’, ‘authority’ and ‘representation’” – as we have noticed in relation to the novel’s opening paragraph, whose lines deconstruct the conventional heroine; it offers “parodic comments on a specific work or fictional mode” – in this case, the Gothic.

In discussing *Northanger Abbey*, and in considering that the novel brings Catherine to “a sober but salutary disenchantment”, Terry Eagleton (2005, p.105) evaluates that “to establish the novel as an estimable art form [...], Austen must begin with an exclusion”. The critic refers to an exclusion of the Gothic and all the horrors and aberrations related to it (EAGLETON, 2005). According to Eagleton, instead of the Gothic, Austen chooses realism, and “if realism is to be defended against these extravagances, it is because it is in Austen’s eyes a moral as well as a literary stance to the world” (EAGLETON, 2005, p.106).

I do not deny that in Austen morals matter, neither that realism applies to her fiction. But Austen’s realism is also psychological, besides being moral. It is a kind of modern realism which endows the characters with psychological depth and which experiments with language and literary resources so as to produce ambiguity and instability, mainly through irony and parody – thus, through a consciousness of literary construction. In *Northanger Abbey*, specifically, the tradition of the Gothic is incorporated and parodied, but to a certain extent. Is it really the Gothic which is excluded from Austen’s parodic play? Or isn’t the narrator claiming for a more mature attitude towards reading and the fantasizing process which the act of reading entails, lest one is unable to distinguish life from reality? It is relevant to remember that the general question of (mis)reading and (mis)interpretation is recurrent in all Austen novels, and that has mainly to do with human experience and life. Furthermore, her protagonists all need to go through a process of learning, through psychological, emotional growth. In *Northanger Abbey*, this necessity is articulated with the subjectivity of a character who is naïve both in life and as a reader of Gothic literature.

Eagleton’s assessment of Austen’s realism can be articulated with a powerful gesture in a scene of the 2006 adaptation of *Northanger Abbey* (directed by Jon

Jones, with Andrew Davies' script):² the moment when Catherine Morland, back home humiliated from the Tilneys' abbey-mansion, throws the book *The mysteries of Udolpho* in the fireplace and burns it. Considering adaptation as a mode of reading, we can trace a parallel between Eagleton's and Davies' understanding of Catherine Morland at the end of the novel. Burning the book is another way (a more aggressive one) of conveying what Eagleton termed Austen's act of exclusion of the Gothic. Furthermore, burning a novel which is an epitome of the Gothic implies not only a fierce rejection of this literary tradition, but, metaphorically, of literature itself, and also of the power of fantasy and imagination associated with it.

And yet, how can one conciliate such a straightforward interpretation with Austen's ambiguous way of saying things? How can we avoid the surprise and the shock when another level of meaning in Austen's novel allows for a defense of writers, of literature and of imagination, as demonstrated above in this discussion? Besides, Austen's parodic look into the Gothic is a complex one, since the General, although a character in a realist novel (Austen's), possesses a degree of coldness, villainy and cruelty that anyone (and not just Catherine) would associate with a Gothic character. Austen's parody, in *Northanger Abbey*, does not concern only the Gothic, but, as usual with her, it is also addressed to a univocal way of viewing and understanding life. At the end of chapter XXIV, Henry lectures Catherine on what it means to be English, providing her with a lesson of rationality. His words intertwine the concept of nation with that of Christian religion:

Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the nation in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians (AUSTEN, 1994, p.182).

Henry goes on affirming that the English education and laws do not allow the atrocities Catherine had imagined (that the General either kept his wife imprisoned or had murdered her).

The fact is that Henry is only partially right. As such, he also becomes a target of the novel's parodic look. Although he is right in his evaluation that *Northanger Abbey* – metonymically a representation of the country at large – is a place where “murder was not tolerated, servants were not slaves and neither poison nor sleeping potions to be procured [...]” (AUSTEN, 1994, p.184), he was narrow-minded as to his father's lack of scruples: “[...] in forcing [Catherine] on such a measure, General Tilney had acted neither honourably nor feelingly, neither as a gentleman nor as a parent” (AUSTEN, 1994, p.218). The novel's general perspective seems to

² According to Sue Parril (2002), the same attitude appears in the 1986 BBC adaptation of *Northanger Abbey*, directed by Giles Foster, and not considered in the present paper. For Parril (2002, p.186), burning the book is “a vivid visualization of Catherine's disillusionment with the value of the novel as a guide for living”.

say there are varied ways for the Gothic to be manifested. And England, though a civilized and Christian nation, was not immune to certain “Gothic” characteristics and attitudes.

Burning the book is an exaggeration that aligns with the general tone the adaptation adopts when dealing with the Gothic material. In Austen, the Gothic gets materialized through references to novels such as *The mysteries of Udolpho* and *The monk*. There are several dialogues between the characters referring to their readings and reactions. The chapter narrating the journey to the abbey dramatizes an eloquent dialogue between Henry and Catherine as it concerns her fantastic expectations about the ‘horridness’ of the place. But except for the moment when Catherine and Isabella talk about the mystery of the black veil in *Udolpho*, and Catherine mentions her supposition that it must hide a skeleton (Laurentina’s skeleton), we do not have access to the specific contents of these novels – I mean, the Gothic novels are not directly quoted in *Northanger Abbey* – they are referred to. And the references are parodically incorporated through the characters’ comments, as when Henry simulates to Catherine that she will find a typical Gothic setting and a whole Gothic atmosphere in the abbey. Henry’s discourse concerns the suspense and fear characteristic of the Gothic context. There are also ironic comments on the part of the narrator, such as the one describing the Allens’ and Catherine’s journey to Bath:

Under these unpromising auspices the journey began. It was performed with suitable quietness and uneventful safety. Neither robbers nor tempests befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero (AUSTEN, 1994, p.7).

The passage illustrates an instance of “parodic stylization” (BAKHTIN, 1987, p.303), since it plays with the sensationalist context of danger Catherine was accustomed to in her literary readings. Differently from that, her journey is ordinary and safe – as such, no hero appears, as there is no dangerous circumstance for him to perform.

A main difference, when we watch the screen adaptation, is that it *shows* the Gothic sequences. The distinction, in this case, between the implicit strategy of inserting the Gothic in the novel, and its explicit visual rendering in the film produces several effects: for one thing, these are sequences that possess a different visual potential or quality from the general photography of the adaptation. The spectator will immediately remember a filmic tradition of the Gothic, of which German Expressionism (CÁNEPA, 2009) constitutes a pioneering illustration, but also more recent productions. The soundtrack enhances the atmosphere of danger, relating to situations that always involve violence, imprisonment, torture, fights, suffering and the possibility of murder. The photogenic nature of the image gets darker not only because of the darkness characterizing Gothic scenery (exemplified

by the presence of tunnels, pits, cells, chambers, vaults) but because the darkness is meant to metaphorize emotional and psychological experiences. Furthermore, the sequences are loaded with sexual force and appeal, an aspect demonstrated through the characters' clothes and sensuous looks.

The Gothic sequences, appearing in the film from the very beginning, are all mediated by Catherine's fantasies, and the characters performing in them (except for the initial sequences) are the same Catherine gets to know in Bath. As such, it becomes highly problematic to conciliate her subjectivity as, at the same time, that of a naïve girl, who hasn't had any sexual experience, and that of a girl whose fantasies are loaded with sexual connotations. This aspect becomes further inconceivable in a scene when Catherine is bathing and starts fantasizing about Henry. Her fantasy is enacted and shown. Again, we feel an opposition between the visual richness of the scene and the unreasonable meaning it conveys: because Catherine is naked, she feels at first ashamed of Henry (who is dressed as a clergyman and holding a book), and wants to hide, but he tells her not to be ashamed, for, as he says, "it's all God's creation", including her nakedness. And she stands up naked before him (for the spectator, only part of her nakedness is shown).

Scenes showing nakedness and sex in recent Austen adaptations have somehow become a tendency; such is the case in the 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (after Wickham and Lydia elope); in the 1999 adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (when Fanny catches Henry and Maria red-handed); in this adaptation of *Northanger Abbey* – besides the scene commented on above, there is also one in which Isabella and Captain Frederick Tilney are shown in the bed – the implication is that they have just made sex. Isabella still asks the Captain: "And now, are we engaged?" To which he answers: "Stand up and make yourself decent".

The problem with the insertion of these scenes is not that they constitute additions, being, therefore, not Austen's; neither is the problem related to showing nakedness and sex. Austen is not indifferent to sex, neither to the powerful implications of sexuality.³ But in her novels this comes in a rather implicit way. The displacement the adaptations make provide an explicit explanation for contemporary audiences that might not understand the sexual politics in the early 19th century. For those who already know the author and are familiar with her books, such scenes appear to be not only redundant, because they say too much, but they sound out of place, closer to Thomas Hardy or Emily Brontë, later English authors than Austen. Such scenes are actually included as a way to appeal to contemporary audiences, mainly those who are not so familiar with her novels. When he wrote the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* script, Andrew Davies chose to make what he names a "pro-Darcy adaptation" (CARTMELL; WHELEHAN, 2007, p.244), because he wanted

³ In the text "Expressões do erotismo e da sexualidade em *Orgulho e Preconceito*", I discuss two sequences focusing on this issue. Vide Azerêdo (2011).

the public (mainly the female one) to identify with the character: “if they saw him suffering or just doing something very physical, the audience would treat him more like a real person, and not just have Elizabeth’s view, where she only sees him when he’s in a bad mood all dressed up in evening dress” (CARTMELL; WHELEHAN, 2007, p.244).

To give an example of Austen’s indirect treatment of sexuality in *Northanger Abbey*, I would like to consider a dialogue between Isabella (at this time engaged to James) and Captain Tilney; Catherine, who is James’ sister, is also by her side, and that is why Isabella and Tilney talk very low:

“What! Always to be watched, in person or by proxy!”

“Psha, nonsense!” was Isabella’s answer, in the same half whisper. “Why do you put such things into my head? If I could believe it! – my spirit, you know, is pretty independent.”

“I wish your heart were independent. That would be enough for me.”

“My heart, indeed! What can you have to do with hearts? You men have none of you any hearts.”

“!If we have not hearts, we have eyes; and they give us torment enough” (AUSTEN, 1994, p.131).

At that time, in the context of Gentry society, it would be inconceivable for a woman to act the way Isabella does. Although Isabella and James are engaged, she responds to Captain Tilney’s flirtations, being disrespectful even to Catherine’s presence. The dialogue above shows how Tilney views Isabella as a sexual object, to be admired and desired (and consumed). The opposition he makes between “heart” and “eye” reveals his actual interest in Isabella, which will eventually culminate in her loss of reputation. The choice of words displaces the concept of an attachment constructed on feeling (heart), which has a romantic basis, to that based on the body (represented through the word “eye”, offering torment because vision increases desire). Isabella’s transgression in terms of sexuality is well captured in the film through the costumes she wears, always highlighting her bosom and sensuality. As Darcy in *Pride and prejudice*, Isabella also embodies an erotic object. The difference is that Darcy has the power to be a sexual object and still go on being a subject and a highly respected man. The sexual appeal, in Darcy, constitutes a plus, an addition in a list of attributes. Isabella, being a poor woman, can only exert power through eroticism momentarily. As such, her belief in her “independence of spirit” (mentioned in the dialogue above) is a chimera.

The conclusion we can get, when we consider, in general terms, the way the adaptation transposed *Northanger Abbey* to screen, is that its main concern has been to make the novel’s narrative palatable to contemporary audiences. The dramatization of Gothic scenes and also comments on the part of the characters

about the haunted atmosphere of the abbey, from the very beginning, show a necessity to link Catherine's subjective characterization as a Gothic reader to the sub-plot occurring when she eventually goes to the abbey. The sexual component of Gothic literature is also introduced through dialogues that refer to Lord Byron's "wickedness" and *Udolpho* as being "hot stuff". At the end of the film, Henry didactically explains to Catherine, in justification for his father's gross behavior, that although their house (the abbey) was not actually haunted, it was inhabited by a kind of vampirism and that somehow "his father drained his mother's blood". Again, this constitutes a superfluous and literal explanation to justify Catherine's suspicions about Henry's father, thus erasing the connotative implications inherent in the parody. The fact is that the parodic codification of the Gothic, in *Northanger Abbey* (the novel), possesses a subversive impulse towards the literary tradition, but this aspect does not find an equivalent in the adaptation. The screen version of Austen's novel only superficially addresses the construction and effects of the Gothic in visual terms – and when it does, it tends to voice out implications that the spectator could apprehend by himself without the need of being spoon-fed.

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■ **RESUMO:** *Northanger Abbey* pode ser esteticamente definido como um romance metalinguístico e metaficcional. A história de Catherine Morland, a protagonista do romance, é inseparável de sua caracterização subjetiva enquanto leitora de literatura gótica. Desse modo, para contar sua história, o narrador parodicamente questiona o próprio processo de leitura e interpretação das convenções literárias. Essa elaborada construção de duplo discurso – contar uma história e ao mesmo tempo refletir sobre o artifício de sua construção – oferece uma instigante problemática de análise quando o romance é transposto para a tela. De que modo o cinema responde às estratégias metafissionais inovadoras de Austen? O objetivo deste artigo é investigar se a potencialidade da linguagem fílmica em criar técnicas metafissionais encontra ressonância nessa adaptação.

■ **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Metaficção. Paródia. Gótico. Adaptação fílmica.*

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