

CLUELESS AS A CINEMATIC EQUIVALENT OF *EMMA*: A STUDY IN ADAPTATION

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Literature reflects society in all its aspects; it is generally called the mirror of the society. Literature covers the major genres of poetry, drama and novel, and is something that reflects society. Like literature cinema too is an art form which not only reflects the society it is set in but also acts as a reflector to that society. In the words of Linda Costanzo Cahir:

Like a work of literature, a film is the result of the process of composition, the meaning of which is “to make by putting together.” Literature and film composition, unlike a painting, for example, both comprise a series of constantly changing images. The compositional structure of both is created from the splicing together of a sequence of smaller units: a paragraph (or stanza) in literature and a shot in film. (45)

Some films leave their mark on society and society, in turn reacts to these films in a variety of ways. Film is considered to be an important art form and a source of popular entertainment. The origin of the name ‘film’ comes from the fact that photographic film has historically been the primary motion pictures. A common name for film in the United States is movie, while in Europe the term film is generally preferred. Additional terms for the field generally include the big screen, silver screen, cinema, photo play, moving picture and flick.

There are some basic features related to literature and some basic terms related to cinema/film, which helps us to understand both the art forms. As in literature the story/plot is an important aspect. In films story refers to all the audience infers about the events that occur in the diegesis on the basis of what they are shown by the plot, the events that are directly presented in the film. The order, duration, and setting of those events, as well as the relation between them all constitute elements of the plot. In literature we see the work of art with the help of plot as a whole, in films through mise-en-scene, which means all the things that are “put in the scene” the setting, the décor, the lighting, the costumes, the performance etc.

In both film and novel story, plot, setting, theme and characters are common but methodology of both the medium is distinct. The most important distinction between the novel and cinema, literature and film arises from the fact that the novel is a verbal medium whereas the film is essentially visual, but visualization is significant where both mediums are concerned. This brings a similarity between the two arts. Visualization of a writer works out more as compared to the visualization of a film, and visualization in the novels has made it possible to turn the novels into movies.

In fiction the distinction between the narrator and the reader is clear. In the films, however the viewer identifies himself with the lens and this tends to fuse with the narrator. The narration differs in both the art forms, which effects the point of view as the camera acts as an omniscient narrator in the film and audience is directly involved in the plot, where as in novel the reader has to view the plot through the narrator. In *Understanding Movies* Louis G. Giannetti writes:

In literature the first-person and the omniscient voice are mutually exclusive for if a first person character tells us his own thoughts directly, he can't also tell us-with certainty- the thoughts of other. But in movies, the combination of first-person and omniscient narration is common. Each time the director moves his camera-either within a shot or between shots-we are offered a new point-of-view from which to evaluate the scene. (370)

With the ground breaking invention of film in the later-nineteenth century a new and exciting medium took the audiences by storm. Almost simultaneously with the emergence of film, the phenomenon of adaptations came into being. Right from the early days on, filmmakers were constantly in search of stories and narratives they could transfer to the new medium, which eventually resulted in the production of the first film adaptations at the end of the nineteenth century.

Film adaptation had become a prominent preoccupation of modern academics. Adaptation is like converting something from one medium to another. In the printed medium the writer is ever present, and is constantly communicating with the reader, as the narrator. In the audio visual medium the director does not have the luxury of narrative and has to create the impact through dialogues and acting with the help of the camera.

Adaptation is not a new phenomenon at all; intertextual studies show that a story always seems to derive from other stories. Even ancient Greek playwrights, like Sophocles and Euripides, based their plays in most cases on myths and stories that had already been told, but adaptation proper is a relatively modern feature. When compared with the approximately five hundred years history of printing-press culture, two hundred years history of film seems remarkably brief. Despite the relative newness of the technology of cinema, moving images have quickly become the central conveyors of narrative and have a greater influence as compared to other art forms.

Before films, novels were often adapted for the theatre; however, with the introduction of film and television, adaptations were available to greater numbers therefore attracting more critical attention. George Bluestone was one of the pioneer theorists in the field of film adaptations and the first one to give a book-length treatise on the subject. His seminal works *Novels into Film* is generally considered a corner stone in adaptation theory. Although the treatise is already dating back to 1957, many of the concepts Bluestone postulated are still widely acknowledged and arguably set the ground for contemporary adaptation theory. Bluestone begins by creating a dichotomy:

I have assumed, and attempted to demonstrate, that the two media are marked by such essentially different traits that they belong to separate artistic genera. Although novels and films of a certain kind do reveal a number of similarities...one finds the differentia more startling. More important, one finds the differentia infinitely more problematic to the

filmmaker. These distinguishing traits follow primarily from the fact that the novel is a linguistic medium, the film essentially visual. (vi)

The consequential increasing popularity of film represented an immediate threat to the superior position of literature, which Bluestone assumedly intended to evade by stating that literature and film constitute two completely different things that are mutually incompatible, for each medium “is characterized by unique and specific properties” (6). Although novel and film seem to be quite similar at the surface, they are each a separate and unique medium, whose respective specific “nature gives rise to forms of artistic expression distinct from those in other media”. While giving shape to “the medium’s conventions and setting limitations regarding the possible forms of representation available in that medium” (Cardwell 44), which inevitably renders the two media incompatible. Bluestone refers to this as the “fitful relationship between novel and film: overtly compatible, secretly hostile” (2).

For the purpose of pointing out the hidden hostility between the two media, Bluestone opens his 1957 argumentation with juxtaposing two citations of Joseph Conrad, the novelist, and D.W. Griffith, the filmmaker. In the preface to *Nigger of the Narcissus* Joseph Conrad writes: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel- it is before all, to make you see” (Conrad 1896: Preface, quoted in Bluestone 1). Conrad’s statement is echoed in almost the exact same words by director D.W. Griffith nearly twenty years later: “the task I’m trying to achieve is above all to make you see” (Griffith, quoted in Bluestone 1). The juxtaposition of these two statements, which are cited time and again in the discourse of adaptation theory, serves Bluestone to point out the distinction between the two different ways of seeing prevalent in literature and film, in that he continues arguing that despite Conrad and Griffith basically follow the same intention, they are talking about two different ways of ‘seeing’: while reading a novel stimulates the imagination of the reader and, in this way, evokes an image in his mind, the ‘seeing’ Griffith is referring to is of a different kind, namely visual, i.e. directly through the stimulation of the eye. As Bluestone claims “between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media” (1).

Geoffrey Wagner also suggests three methods of adaptation.

1. Transposition, this has the least amount of alterations from novel to film;
 2. Commentary, which has a purposeful alteration of some sort: and
 3. Analogy, in which there is significant “departure” so that an entirely different work is created.
- These methods are similar to Andrew’s forms though Wagner terms them differently. Linda Cahir also talked about three modes of adaptation literal, traditional, and radical which correlates to the parameters of Andrews and Wagner.

There is no escaping to Jane Austen. As William F. Buckley, Jr. states that “one doesn’t read Jane Austen; one re-reads Jane Austen”. Though it has been nearly two hundred years since her death, Austen and her works continues to capture the minds and hearts of readers worldwide. Our fascination with her novels continues to grow, finding new expression in literature, television and film each year. What makes this phenomenon so interesting is the reality that Austen’s novels are so firmly “dated”—that is, so rigorously cemented and relevant to the age in which they were written. Why do readers and viewers continue to find Austen’s works so relevant, given that it is so bound to this particular late eighteenth and early nineteenth century period and its social and cultural structures and values? This question is best explained through

the examination of contemporary film that has so determinedly adapted her works over the past fifteen years. While these films labour to interpret Austen's novels to film, at the same time they communicate through various departures how our perspective, both culturally and about Austen's work- and period of history has changed. Yet even in these departures, the films resonate dynamically with values which, over the course of two hundred years, remain unchanged. Despite the numerous and apparent shifts in culture, values and structures that have occurred in our world over the past two centuries, the core of what we value- what we hold to be most true and important remains timeless.

The boom of film or television adaptations of Jane Austen's novels makes one wonder why the turn- of- the- nineteenth century writer is still so popular today. Sue Parrill answers the question by listing a few reasons like the novels being "good stories" (3), also they are highbrow, therefore valuable literature and their adaptations are likely to win important awards. "Name recognition is another selling point" (3) in Sue Parrill's view, furthermore, production is relatively easy since the novels are in the public domain and they do not require "expensive special effects" (3). In words of Suzanne R. Pucci:

Austen adaptations have been popular among filmmaker and moviegoers, in great part because Austen's novels provide scenarios addressing contemporary post feminist concerns. With their complex tales of romance, their diverse cast of male and female characters, they offer scripts that can be used to capture the anxieties, fantasies, and contradictions many men and women experience in the domain of gender and gender relations. (229)

After the birth of cinema at the end of the xviii century, filmmakers have often chosen to adapt famous novels or tales for their first attempts of entertainment. Jane Austen's work has not appeared in the early cinema production, during the years of silent movies. This absence may be accounted for by considering the term 'silent' itself. How could a silent representation celebrate the character of Elizabeth Bennet at best? Deborah Cartmell finds a silent adaptation "quite absurd", in particular because of "the pleasure of being in the choice of words and in the verbal subtleties" (4). How could a silent movie represent Darcy's disdain towards Elizabeth at the first ball or Elizabeth reading Darcy's letter or her witty replies to the provocations of Lady Catherine? Once the sound era had come, the very first recorded filming of the novel is in 1938 for a television adaptation. Since then Jane Austen's novels found home in the television. The data shows the "highly adaptagenic nature of the novel in the sound era" (Cartmell 5).

Emma published in 1815, is considered to be the most accomplished of all Austen's novels. Basically Emma is an intelligent, upper class young woman who thinks she knows more than other people. She decides to use her knowledge to become a matchmaker for her little friend Harriet. Emma finds out that she doesn't know as much as she thinks; while she discovers she misread quite a few of her acquaintances. She discovers she didn't even know herself as well as she thought. It is widely popular with filmmakers and audience since its first adaptation in 1948. According to Sue Parrill, "In style, organization and character development, this novel represents the high point of her literacy accomplishment" (107).

In 1995, Paramount released a modern adaptation of Emma titled *Clueless*. The main character is called Cher, who plays the role of Emma in this adaptation. The role of Cher was played by Alicia Silverstone. She lives in Hollywood of the 1990s. This modernized version

includes voiceover narration which is similar to Austen's ironic third-person narrator. According to Deborah Cartmell, "Clueless, then, able to provide a corollary to the complex hierarchies of *Highbury*, with similar prohibitions against crossing class lines to form intimate relationships" (173). *Clueless* exemplifies the third category of Geoffrey term, analogy. Though *Clueless* departs a considerably from *Emma* but there is intersection with Austen's novel.

Writer and director Amy Heckerling used the main characters and chief plot elements of the novel, but she has heightened the humour. Though the novel of Jane Austen has been set in the modern times, but the film retains many elements of the novel, including the emphasis on Cher's realization that she has herself endangered her own happiness by meddling in the lives of the others. This adaptation is totally an analogy adaptation as it represents modern Emma or Emma of this century. According to Marc Di Paolo:

...Clueless is the film that comes to closest, to finding a cinematic equivalent of Austen's "free-indirect" writing style, it is also the film that alters the book the most by changing the criteria by which Emma evaluates worthy mates for herself and her friends. Instead of judging men's eligibility by uncovering their noble lineage, land holdings, and annual income, she is primarily concerned with men who possess the liberal vales of the sexual revolution while being free from the behavioural excesses that lead to drug additions and sexually transmitted diseases. (3)

Emma lives a wealthy life with her indulgent father after her mother dies. This is exactly the background of Cher. Both the film and novel stress paternal wealth as the key to the heroine's sense of self-worth and confidence. The novel's famous opening line makes it clear from the outset, "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of best blessings of existence: and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (Austen 1). In the absence of mother, Emma is mistress of Hartfield, secure enough in her own right to dismiss marriage as an option. Cher, too, is mistress of her father's house, possessed of all the modern trappings of excess: designer clothes, sport utility vehicle, cellular phone, and so on. To great extent, Cher, like Emma, is a spoiled daughter, used to getting her own way and indulged in her penchant for manipulations.

The film's emphasis on the superficial is at once a commentary on the contemporary media's dominance and a reflection of the novel's emphasis on signs, particularly on their misinterpretation. For this reason, *Clueless* is most faithful to *Emma* in its recreation of the plot involving Mr Elton, Harriet Smith and Emma. Determined to find a match for the clergy man, Mr Elton, Emma fixes on Harriet Smith. To orchestrate their involvement, Emma sketches a portrait of Harriet, intending the exercise as a ruse to draw Mr Elton, attention to Harriet's beauty. This scene is duplicated in a modernised version of *Emma* that is *Clueless*. Cher takes Tai's photograph and mistakes Elton's request for a copy as evidence of his attraction for Tai.

In the novel as well as in the movie both Mr Knightley and Josh start off as brother figures and they become major love interest. Cher/Emma initially tries and set Tai/Harriet with Elton without realizing the fact that he is in love with Cher/ Emma. Though initially appealing, Christian was an unsuitable paramour for Cher because he is gay, while Frank was bad for Emma because he was engaged to another. Robert Martin was deemed both in the novel and film

because in the novel he was farmer and in the movie he was a stoner. Cher, like Emma, misreads the intention of three men.

Clueless perfectly transplant the world of Emma into 1990s America. Most of Austen's characters are doppelgangers and the events unfold much as they do in the book. But the director of the film Amy Heckerling was able to convey a lot of Austen's voice. By moving Emma to Beverly Hills, Heckerling was able to depict fully the depth of social satire which was a major concern in the novel.

Clueless brings the novel into our own era, successfully transplanting *Emma* into the California high school culture of the 1990s. Heckerling offers a series of suggestive parallels between Austen's heroine and her cinematic counterpart but these differences are at the surface only because the film features the same key theme of match-making. Heckerling exploits the contemporary medium of to create an Emma of our own time. In Heckerling's hands Austen's novel proves itself to be surprisingly malleable and readily adaptable to the contemporary period. Ultimately, however, the cinematic versions capture the same contradictions of the novel.

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