Cinematic Narratives: Transatlantic Perspectives
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Contents

Cinematic Narratives 9
  Morris Beja, Ellen Carol Jones, Cecília Beecher Martins,
  José Duarte, Suzana Ramos

1. Cinematic Traditions

Body Double: The Author Incarnate in the Cinema 33
  Lucy Fischer

Many Came Running: Notes on Tradition in Classic American
  Film Melodrama 57
  Mário Jorge Torres

Sounds of Silence: Sound in Sunset Boulevard and The Artist 81
  Maria Wojdylo

Watching Austen, Reading Ourselves 95
  Ana Daniela Coelho

“You Like Watching?”: Fear and Desire in the Films of Stanley Kubrick 107
  Morris Beja

2. Cinema, Social Translation, Politics

Portuguese Americans on Screen: Hollywood Gone-a-Changing
  or the Power and Persistence of Stereotypes? 129
  Reinaldo Francisco Silva

Locating a Post-Black Aesthetics in the Cinema of Spike Lee 147
  Teresa Botelho

Manipulating Taboo in Film Discourse: The Case of Subtitling
  in Portugal 161
  Catarina Xavier

Style, Narrative, and Cultural Politics in Bullitt 177
  Jeffrey Childs
## 3. Cinema, the Body, the Psyche

**Gestating Monstrosity: Cinematic Representations of Artificial Wombs**

*Alina Ferreira*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Consuming Passions: Appetites for Sex, Food, and Love in Contemporary Romantic Comedy**

*Emily Fox-Kales*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Don’s Journey: *Broken Flowers* by Jim Jarmusch**

*José Duarte*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mirrors and Open-Ended Questions in Cameron Crowe’s *Elizabethtown***

*Cecília Beecher Martins*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**“They Were Fictions!”: Creating Fictions as a Way of Accessing Legends in Todd Haynes’s *Velvet Goldmine* and *I’m Not There***

*Helena Carneiro*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 4. From Experimental to Narrative Film: The Journey of a Director

**“Heart-Mysteries There”: The Films of Thaddeus O’Sullivan**

*Ellen Carol Jones*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**“So Truthful in the Particular”: Thaddeus O’Sullivan**

*Interview with Ellen Carol Jones and Morris Beja*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Contributors**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ana Daniela Coelho*

Watching Austen, Reading Ourselves

Adaptation: the Other Side of the Question

During the last two decades, adaptation studies have gradually earned their place in the academic world. The recent creations of the “Association of Adaptation Studies” and of the academic journal Adaptation are decisive steps toward the definition of an independent and exciting field of studies. As such, we finally seem to be moving away from the long-lasting dominance which both literary and film studies held over adaptation. However, although it is becoming an important and autonomous field of studies inside the academy, outside the academy adaptation retains the status of “copy” that has haunted it from the beginning of its theorization. Thus, the idea of adaptation as “minor and subsidiary and certainly never as good as the ‘original’” (Hutcheon xiv) is still a well-established image, despite the efforts of recent critics such as Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (2007), Kamilla Elliott (2003), Linda Hutcheon (2013), or Thomas Leitch (2007) to dismiss it. It must therefore not be surprising to find in a newspaper’s cinema column or fan blog, for example, the obvious “not as good as the book” conclusion, whenever the subject is a filmic adaptation of a well-known novel.

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1 Although I acknowledge the variety of media in which adaptation may occur, I am here thinking primarily of screen adaptation, made both for cinema and television, given its importance in contemporary entertainment culture.
Nevertheless, my main concern is not to reflect on the all-too-debated way in which we look at adaptation, but on the way adaptation looks at us. In other words, what do recent adaptations say about ourselves: how do they reflect us both as individuals and as members of a given cultural moment? This aspect is, in my opinion, especially interesting when discussing film, and adaptation in particular. In fact, although I recognize the importance of defining what is (and is not) adaptation, I find that discussion sometimes tends to leave other important issues aside. As such, in the effort to find recognition in both academic and non-academic environments, adaptation studies run the risk of dismissing as secondary questions such as reception and social impact, which in truth are of the utmost importance. Adaptation must then be thought of as a vital part of contemporaneity, as both a product and a producer of cultural meaning. By selecting this approach I am following the notion of film and also television as a social practice, as enunciated by Graeme Turner:

Film is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself. (3)

The choice of Jane Austen's adaptations as a case study is also easy to understand. Adaptations of this English novelist's works have not only been numerous—six from 2000 onwards if we take into consideration only the ones which overtly assume to adapt the novels as heritage films—but also very successful. Furthermore, the fact that Jane Austen has become

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2 There is one adaptation for each novel (see http://www.jasna.org/film/index.html), besides Austen-related films such as Becoming Jane (2007), The Jane Austen Book Club (2007), Miss Austen Regrets (2008), Lost in Austen (2008), and Austenland (2013).

3 The term “heritage film” has been described as a “variant of art cinema that derives its cultural credentials from (usually literary) source materials rather than from any aspiration to aesthetic or cinematic innovativeness. The heritage film is widely regarded as part of a ‘heritage culture’ which emerged in the 1980s as a strategy of promoting Britain and ‘Britishness’ (or more accurately ‘Englishness’) in terms of the nation’s traditions and past…. Heritage culture is commonly seen as constructing a form of British national identity that is coupled with nostalgia—a conservative longing for a stable past which might or might not have ever existed. At the same time, it is also argued that heritage culture is associated with globalization and the postmodern condition, in the sense that history becomes replaced by a simulacrum or pastiche of the past” (Kuhn and Westwell 203). I prefer this term to the alternative and widely used “costume drama,” given the exaggerated importance to costume suggested by the latter.

4 As an example, and according to IMDB, the 2005 film Pride & Prejudice grossed more than 120 million dollars worldwide – http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0414387/ (accessed 1.3.2014).
a paradigmatic case in the field of adaptation studies—so that a book on the subject that does not include at least one chapter on an adaptation of her works is difficult to find—makes her the best choice when thinking of adaptation as a reflection of our own contemporary society. To prove my point, I will focus my attention on Jane Austen’s screen adaptations in the twenty-first century, namely on the film *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and the TV miniseries *Sense & Sensibility* (2008). Although my main objects of study will be those adaptations, I will also consider two previous adaptations of the same novels, the 1995 TV adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* and the 1995 cinematic adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*.

*Pride & Prejudice* as Romantic Ideal: “a truth universally acknowledged”?

*Pride & Prejudice*, directed by Joe Wright with a screenplay by Deborah Moggach, was released in 2005 and was just the second cinematic adaptation of Jane Austen’s best-known novel. The previous one, directed by Robert Z. Leonard with a screenplay by Aldous Huxley and Jane Murfin, was a 1940 screwball comedy starring Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier. The twenty-first century adaptation is thus one that intends first to fill this void and second to present a totally different version from the previous Austen adaptations, the ones produced for television, making it a modern story at the same time. This intention is explicitly assumed by Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner, two of the film’s producers, as well as by the director Joe Wright:

> We [Bevan and Fellner] met with him [Wright], and his vision of how to make the film and tell the classic Austen story was in tune with ours. For all of us there was no point in reinventing the story, as it is such a worldwide favourite. But we wanted to present the story as it was written, casting actors at the ages Jane Austen indicated, and giving them a depiction which avoided the “chocolate box” presentations that television veers towards. Joe is a true romantic, yet he also shoots the story in a modern way and without subverting it. (“Pride & Prejudice: Production Notes” 4)

This statement of intention is interesting for how much it reveals of the driving forces behind this particular production. On the one hand, in claiming “there was no point in reinventing the story” and in stressing the
importance of “casting actors at the ages Jane Austen indicated,” there seems to be a reverence toward the author of the novel, something not surprising when adapting a classic literary work. On the other hand, and at the same time, there is an assumed intention of departing from the previous television adaptations, namely the heritage and picturesque imagery, trademarks of the BBC and Merchant Ivory productions of the late twentieth century. However, the most interesting part comes with the very last sentence, since the two distinctive traits of this adaptation are enunciated: it is foremost a romantic and modern production, as I shall demonstrate.

Pride & Prejudice (2005) is above all a romantic film, in the sense that it focuses on the love story between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. In doing so it does in fact go beyond the novel, where even though the love story between the two main characters undeniably has center stage, it is also surrounded by intricate social questions such as the role of matrimony, the differences between classes, and the position of women in society. All these issues practically disappear in the film, giving way to a fairytale-like story of love, disappointment, and a happy ending. This emphasis is obvious throughout the film, although some scenes are particularly evident in expressing it. An example is the scene in which Mr. Darcy first proposes to Elizabeth: whereas in the novel this scene takes place inside a room in Mr. Collins' parsonage, the film places it outside, with the two characters changing angry arguments in a rather picturesque Greek-style temple, under pouring rain. In this scene it is also interesting to notice both characters’ difficulty in avoiding a kiss, despite the fact they are voicing angry words at each other. Another scene serving the same purpose is the one of Mr. Darcy’s second (and successful) proposal to Elizabeth. Whereas in the novel this scene takes place during a daytime walk from Longbourn to Meryton, in the film a beautiful and sleepless Elizabeth meets a dashing Mr. Darcy as he walks to Longbourn at dawn. Full of romantic clichés, this scene (which mimics the opening images of the film in terms of both setting and diegetic sound) offers the perfect ending for the perfect love story.

As it is, this film is not only romantic in the sense that it is a love story, but also in that it is filled with new, as in up-to-date, Romantic imagery. As Deborah Cartmell has pointed out: “Wright pours on the romantic with both

5 The film location is the Temple of Apollo (built in 1765 by the architect Henry Flitcroft) at Stourhead.
lower and upper case ‘r’s.” (88). In truth, elements such as the identification between natural surroundings in an almost wild state and Elizabeth Bennet’s character, or the recreation of Longbourn as an old, worn, and rural space, are just two examples of several choices which contribute to the creation of a Romantically-influenced imagery. However, this imagery, which becomes the film’s trademark, is not, in the true sense of the word, Romantic. In this adaptation there is a convergence of several aesthetic elements that, though originating in Romanticism (and Victorianism), have been remodeled by contemporaneity, thus creating the image of a past with no concrete referent, which has become, nevertheless, appealing to the target audience. It is this composed imagery, simultaneously past and present, romantic and Romantic, that is constant throughout the 2005 *Pride & Prejudice*—in the idealized rural environment of its initial sequence, in the beautiful and somehow wild appearance of Elizabeth Bennet, and even in the “shabby chic” decoration of Longbourn. Mentioned in the “Production Notes” (12), this expression reflects the vintage style which dominates not only the settings but also the entire production, becoming the embodiment of a (R)omantic reconstruction of the past.

A final aspect must be noticed regarding both scenes here mentioned: their equivalent in the 1995 TV series is much closer to the novel. In fact, in both cases, the BBC adaptation keeps the indoor setting and much of the original text, when possible. This option is a path only apparently easy, given Jane Austen’s tendency to undervalue sentimental scenes by simply omitting them: in both of Darcy’s proposal scenes, dialogue between characters is reduced and potentially emotional parts are narrated by the elusive and ironical voice which distinguishes the author’s novels. Although in other aspects the 1995 adaptation also conveys a traditional and romantic vision of this novel, it does not do so here. This is so true that the romantic climax—Mr. Darcy’s second and successful proposal—may seem to fall short, given our expectations regarding the genre. In fact, this lack of a romantic climax may have been the reason leading to the introduction of a final double wedding scene.

The other defining trait of the 2005 film is its aim to be modern, which in this case must be interpreted as a wish to be closer to contemporary young viewers, as may be understood from Deborah Moggach’s own words:

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6 I have discussed this matter in an earlier work (Coelho 2012).
The Bennets could certainly exist today and, I’m sure, do. It’s only the economics of the situation, the girls’ dependence on finding a good husband, which are germane to the period. All the emotions are equally relevant today. Take Lizzie, for example. She has a mother who is often embarrassing; a best friend who disappoints; unrequited love for someone [Wickham] who turns out to be a complete cad; sisterly loyalties, jealousies, and squabbles; and she falls madly in love with somebody [Darcy] she can’t admit she’s in love with. (“Pride & Prejudice: Production Notes” 5)

The pursued modernity of this adaptation is thus consecrated in the figure of Elizabeth Bennet, here modulated as the contemporary young girl searching for happiness. This is exactly what the viewer expects to find, previously induced by the trailer used to promote the film. In it the story is summarized as:

In an era when marrying a rich man was the most a woman could hope for, Elizabeth Bennet was way ahead of her time.

… the story of a modern woman who discovered the one person she cannot stand is the one man she may not be able to resist.

Throughout the film, both Elizabeth’s physical appearance and her attitudes give us the impression of her being much closer to a modern-day young woman than to a late-eighteenth-century lady. Some critics have emphasized her over-assumed freedom as anachronistic and exaggerated (Fraiman 2010). Although I am inclined to agree, for the most part at least, what is more interesting is that in this move to modernize Elizabeth the adapters have, probably unintentionally, made her a much more traditional character when compared to her literary and even television counterparts. In fact, in the novel Elizabeth Bennet is a surprisingly independent figure who, despite being forced to retract herself by recognizing her misjudgments, conquers Mr. Darcy because of her character and intelligence. In contrast, in the 2005 film, Elizabeth’s proclaimed independence seems to be reduced to dressing choices and a few energetic affirmations. By being presented as a dreamy young girl in search of true love (as suggested by the opening scenes), she inevitably relinquishes what distinguishes her from other nineteenth-century literary heroines. Her true modernity is lost the moment she defines herself by love instead of self-value. In this step back toward a traditional and patriarchal worldview, apparently innocent choices such as casting Keira
Knightley have important consequences. As such, this choice, besides giving in to Hollywood demands of beauty, dangerously suggests the superficiality of this feminine figure by singling her out for beauty instead of intelligence, at the same time as it reinforces the idea of this film as nothing more than a romantic story. In fact, it is impossible not to connect this Elizabeth Bennet with previous protagonists embodied on screen by Keira Knightley in box office successes such as *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (Gore Verbinski, 2003), *King Arthur* (Antoine Fuqua, 2004), and *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003). Although the films belong to different genres, in the first two cases Knightley plays strong, courageous women who defy either society’s boundaries or imminent danger for the sake of love. The last one is, in itself, an homage to love and the romantic comedy genre; the connections between this film and the 2005 *Pride & Prejudice* extend to the inclusion of the main musical theme in the above-mentioned 2005 trailer and to the fact that both share the same production company, Working Title.

In the case of the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet’s singularity as a heroine follows closely on the novel, but again the intention to modernize, and thus come closer to its contemporary audience, opens the way to a more traditional reading. For this BBC adaptation, tradition materializes in the assumed option to bring to the screen the sexual tension between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth. By doing so, Elizabeth is reduced to an object of sexual desire, even if Mr. Darcy eventually falls a victim of the same process, by being presented as something to be consumed by the female audience (in, for instance, the famous “wet shirt” scene). In conclusion, the 1995 adaptation also presents us with a traditional representation of the novel, even if to a lesser degree than in the 2005 cinematic version: Elizabeth’s singularity is intended to reside in her intellect but the choice to emphasize sexual desire leads to a necessary return to a patriarchal framework which was, in its own way, put into question by the novel.

From this brief analysis, it seems that these recent adaptations of Jane Austen’s novels prove our own contradictory desire for perfect and traditional love stories, wrapped as modern and independent. Moreover, such turns are made not only to an apparently suitable novel such as *Pride and Prejudice*, but also to others quite more surprising, such as *Sense and Sensibility*. 
**Sense & Sensibility, or the Next Best Thing**

Given the conclusion just enunciated, is it right to expect that other recent adaptations of Jane Austen’s novels show the same type of move toward a seemingly more modern yet in fact traditional view of this author’s timeless stories? For this, I find it useful to look at another Jane Austen-based adaptation, namely the 2008 BBC adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*, directed by John Alexander. I find it particularly worth considering not only because I think it shares some of the chief traits that define the 2005 *Pride & Prejudice*, but also because its screenplay was written by Andrew Davies, who also wrote the much acclaimed and successful *Pride and Prejudice* television adaptation of 1995. Here, as in the 2005 *Pride & Prejudice*, the purpose of those in charge of the production is to make it into a modern story, appealing to a contemporary (and young) audience:

> One of the most important points for us was to make the cast young, close to the ages they were in the book and to give it a kind of fresh energy.⁸

> The whole point in a way of dramatizing Jane Austen for a contemporary audience is to bring out what Jane Austen's world had in common with our world, and without cheating really, to emphasize this. It's such a contemporary story … ⁹

In order to achieve its goal (one very similar to the 2005 film), this production works to build not one but two perfect romantic stories. However, the task is more difficult here, since this novel seems to fall short of that ideal. In fact, contrary to what happens with Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, the two romantic couples in Jane Austen's first published novel do not seem so perfect for each other. As is the case with Fanny Price, the heroine of the often misunderstood *Mansfield Park* (1814), both Marianne and Elinor's partners seem not exactly perfect, in a Prince Charming kind of way, but actually the best that they could find and hope for, given their precarious situation in society. But although we may, as readers, reluctantly accept Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars as suitable husbands, the romantic expectations demanded by a viewing audience may not be so receptive,

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⁷ Broadcast 1, 6, 13 January 2008, BBC One (http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/senseandsensibility/).

⁸ Producer Anne Pivcevic, DVD option "Interview Featurette."

⁹ Screenwriter Andrew Davies, *idem.*
something that may turn out to be a risk too dangerous to take in economic terms. As such, an enhancement of character was desperately needed and acknowledged by screenwriter Andrew Davies:

We were particularly concerned in this story with making the men really worthy of the girls that they get in the end because that is in a way a weakness of the novel and certainly came out in the previous film, I think. That Edward, although he’s got good reason to be rather hesitant in his approach to Elinor (you know, he’s got a secret attachment that he can’t get out of) he needs to be kind of more manly, more of a man than he seems in the book. Part of this is achieved through casting Dan Stevens who is an extremely attractive actor. But also I shamelessly tried to think of ways in which he could do more physical things.¹⁰

Again, the casting of a beautiful actor is here presented as an improvement needed in order to correspond to audience’s expectations. Also, as had happened with the 1995 adaptation of Pride and Prejudice, the screenwriter chooses to stress the physical part of the masculine protagonist, hence embodying our post-modernist contradictory ideal of a man.¹¹ The need for improvement is even more evident for Colonel Brandon, whose incompatibility with Marianne’s romantic and lively disposition could be particularly striking to modern viewers’ eyes. In the 2008 adaptation this improvement is achieved by accentuating Colonel Brandon’s signs of affection toward Marianne and also by emphasizing his sad story of a broken heart, giving the viewers reason to recognize him as Marianne’s match. In this adaptation he is, in fact, from the very beginning, the perfect man for her: it is her youthful impulsiveness that does not allow her to see that.

Apart from casting and acting choices, reconstruction of these love stories is achieved by some added scenes. As such, great relevance is given to scenes only mentioned in the novel (where the episodes are not narrated but told by one character to another one, for instance), such as the seduction of a

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.
¹¹ Martine Voiret summarizes this ideal masculine figure as follows: “They must be stoic, independent, self-possessed . . . In the wake of the feminist revolution, we now want men to be egalitarian, sensitive, nurturing, and expressive. We, in other words, expect men to possess two sets of somewhat irreconcilable qualities. In Pollack’s words we want them to be ‘tough and gentle, vulnerable, courageous, dependent and independent’ [396]. Jane Austen’s movie adaptations reflect this ambivalence. They translate contemporary desires for a type of masculinity that happily embodies these conflicting features” (238).
schoolgirl by Willoughby (which, in the words of the screenwriter, becomes “a rather shocking opening”) and the duel between Colonel Brandon and Willoughby, in itself a particularly (R)omantically-loaded scene.

**Bringing Austen to Us**

As we have seen, the main goal of these recent Jane Austen adaptations is to bring them closer to their contemporary audiences. Although this can arguably be said to be one of the main principles of adaptation if aiming at success, what makes these new adaptations different is their wish to move beyond, or should I say away from preconceived ideas surrounding adaptations of classic novels, especially ones based on Jane Austen. These adaptations do not really want to be recognized as adaptations, even if both *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and *Sense & Sensibility* (2008) credit Jane Austen in their title sequences. They want to come close to a larger category of films, to be appealing to a wider audience and thus to maximize audience and, of course, profit. Moreover, this movement is one getting stronger in adaptation practice, being in no way confined to adaptations of Jane Austen’s works. As strange as it may sound, it is not difficult to find similarities between these adaptations and the ones based on a writer as different from Jane Austen as Emily Brontë. The 2011 cinematic version of *Wuthering Heights*, directed by Andrea Arnold, shares not only in terms of plot but also in terms of photography and *mise-en-scène* clear similarities with the two productions I have selected. In fact, on the one hand, the importance given to the love story between Catherine and Heathcliff is such that everything else that does not contribute to this main theme is simply eliminated from the plot—thus leading to a film that ends with Catherine’s death and simply dismisses exploiting Heathcliff’s later inner conflicts as well as the satellite stories of the characters whose destinies were shaped by the choices of the two protagonists. On the other hand, the importance given to outside scenes, dominated by a wild natural environment associated with the untamed characters, is also reminiscent of the (R)omantic scenery we discussed earlier.

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12 This opening is particularly important: it is supposed to work as a teaser, since we cannot clearly identify who the seducer and the girl are.
Another curious aspect of this transformation is a tendency toward the blurring of boundaries between television miniseries and films. Despite the fact that television and film remain two different media, recent years have shown a strong evolution of the first, especially in terms of reputation. As actors, directors, and producers easily bounce from the big screen to the small one, both aesthetic and technical features once exclusive to cinema become part of television productions as well. For this reason, what now seems to be a shared vision of the past is evident in all these twenty-first century adaptations, regardless of the medium in question. In a way, this shared vision may help us to overcome the sometimes incapacitating and endless debate on theoretical aspects of translation and direct us to other, more interesting, subjects.

In fact, while we spend our time debating how adaptation relates itself to whatever text it is based on, we miss the most important issue: how do these productions both mirror and shape us as people of a particular time? If these adaptations clearly work to present us with ideal love stories (and achieve success by doing so), it is because they adequately address our expectations. It is our problematic notions of love and happiness—the difficult equilibrium between modern independence and a happy ending—that shape the rereading of these texts. So instead of debating how much adaptations such as these fall short from the novel they adapt, it might be more worthwhile to reflect on why we want them to do so—that is, why is it more important that they reflect our idealizations of a love story than remain close to the story written by Jane Austen. Given this, it is my belief that adaptation studies currently present us with the ideal motives to question who we are, as readers, viewers, and especially as individuals within a society.

To conclude I would like to return to Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*, specifically to the preface to the second edition. Commenting on how fidelity is not an adequate criterion used in judging adaptation, she proposes an alternative:

> This is how biology thinks about adaptation: in terms of successful replications and change. Perhaps cultural adaptation can be seen to work in similar ways. (Hutcheon xxvi)

Following her lead, my question is: if adaptation is in fact evolving, no doubt pressed by our own desires, where are we heading in terms of expectations regarding notions of life, love, and happiness?
Works Cited


Filmography


