

Rereading Austen: from XIX century young lady hero to XXI century vlogger,

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Abstract: *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel authored by English writer Jane Austen, may be considered one of the well-remembered novels from the history of literature. Even though it has been two centuries since its publication, the narrative presents discussions that reverberate nowadays, such as the social role of women and criticisms to a society that privileges appearances. The novel has been adapted several times to various formats such as film, television series or reread onto other literary works. The first attempt to adapt it for the internet is the webseries *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, 2012, broadcasted on a channel on youtube.com. The webseries also created characters' profiles on social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr, allowing audience interaction. One hundred episodes were produced in an effort to bring a contemporary view of the novel by presenting a new post from the main character's vlog at each episode. This article aims to analyze which elements of literary narrative were preserved with this particular adaptation of the novel to a webseries considering the necessary contextualization to maintain verisimilitude.

Keywords: Literature, Webseries, Adaptation, Cyberspace, Social Media, Jane Austen.

Introduction

When an artist gifts the world with his\her work, this piece of art starts to belong to whomever reads, beholds or analyses it from that moment on. Each individual perceives each piece differently, allowing for several readings or comprehensions.

Each text has several layers and each reader holds onto one of these layers. Therefore, the adaptation of a text is the perception and recodification of one or some of these layers.

Transmedia adaptation allows a particular work to be redesigned, enhancing its possibilities. It is up to the person who does the adaptation to

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establish which aspects of the copy-text will be inserted into the new work. Stam, analyzing literature adaptation into film, states:

The art of film adaptation consists partially on the choice of which conventions of the genre will be transposed to the new media, and which of them will be discarded, supplemented, transcoded or replaced. (Stam, 2008: 23)

As an adaptation is made, a new artwork is produced. Thus, there is a revitalization of the original art piece, which is often seen differently from what it was known of. The new artwork may deepen the content and the debates of aspects not perceived by or highlighted from the original. Thereby, the adapter can be seen as an artist whose task is to “mine hidden treasures” of a previous work.

The new artwork also offers the opportunity to publicize it for a different audience that is already familiar with it. To Hutcheon,

The different genre and media of which and for which stories are transcoded on the adaptation process are not just formal entities, but they also represent different ways to interact with the audiences. (Hutcheon, 2013: 15)

An artwork can be updated at each adaptation, adding admirers from different target audiences. An example of such relation are the several adaptations from Jane Austen’s masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The story of Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy has been adapted to other literary work, films, television series and web series. Each adaptation presents an aspect of Austen’s original text. To Bazin, in a literal adaptation, the result is poor; meanwhile a translation made too freely is condemned, because the essence of the original is lost. The “good adaptation” would be the one considered capable of “restore the essential from the text and its spirit” (BAZIN, 1991: 96). Respecting the spirit of the artwork can be understood as keeping the essence of the narrative in the copy-text. The majority of *Pride and Prejudice*’s adaptations emphasizes the love story between the main characters, leaving other aspects of the romance, like irony and social critics, in the background. Another aspect the adapters face is maintaining the period and place in which the copy-text takes place (nineteenth century up-country England) or changing it to another time and place (twenty-first century USA). These shifts, most of the

times, rather than moving the adaptation away from the essence of the original one, tend to offer a greater respect to other aspects of the narrative that are not really emphasized on other adaptations.

An example of this shift that resulted in respect to the essence of the original novel is the webseries *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012-2013). The webseries was broadcasted on a Youtube channel, had one hundred episodes and presented a more contemporary version of the narrative. Each episode presented a post from Lizzie Bennet's vlog, a graduate student from a master in Communications program who is making her thesis.

This article aims to analyze the relations between the original novel and the webseries from the contextualization needed to build verisimilitude and respect to Jane Austen's narrative.

***Pride and Prejudice*—Adaptation of Text Genres**

To each communicative situation, an option for a particular text genre is needed as a way for better receive its informative content. As socially consolidated, as they may be, text genres are not sealed entities, immune to subjective and creative action from their producers. Text genres also undergo transformation, just like society in its fullness. Technological advances, the change in the ways we face social structures and the development of human knowledge are some elements that contribute to the evolution of human communication and, therefore, in the form of text genres. According to Marcuschi,

It is not difficult to realize that in the past two centuries new technologies, especially those connected to communications, led to the emergence of new text genres. Obviously, it is not properly the technologies, *per se*, that create the genres, but the intensity of the use of those technologies and their interference on daily communicative activities. Thus, the great technological support in communications such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines, the internet, by having a strong presence and a great centralized nature of social reality's communicative activities that they help to create, provide and harbor very characteristic new genres (Marcuschi, 2002).

This way, adapting a text genre onto another, like doing it from an artistic expression to another, presents countless possibilities. Any text can be

transposed to another form, because there are countless reading possibilities of the original work. To Stam,

The trope of the adaptation as a ‘readin’ of the copy-text novel, inevitably partial, personal, conjunctural, for example, suggests that, in the same way any literary work can generate an infinity of readings, it can also happen with any novel, which can generate a series of adaptations (Stam, 2008, p.21).

These adaptations cannot be looked as inferior or parasites of the copy-text, but as different productions, that aim to renovate a narrative, propose a new reading or highlight an specific aspect of the text. To Hutcheon, “although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, only as double or multilayered works they can be theorized as adaptations” (Hutcheon, 2013: 28). Therefore, the focus of the study of adaptations must not be limited to the respect or the fidelity to the original. However, to expand it to a comparative study, that aims to analyze the multiple reading possibilities of the original work.

Pride and Prejudice, the novel written by the English author Jane Austen and published in 1813, may be considered one of the most adapted artworks. Besides literary adaptations², like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, by Helen Fielding (1996), *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith (2009) and *Death comes to Pemberley*, by P.D. James (2011), it was adapted several times to the cinema, lastly being a British, French and American co-production released in 2005 and directed by Joe Wright. It also had adaptations for television, like the homonymous 1995 BBC’s production and *Lost in Austen*, produced by ITV, in 2008.

The first adaptation made for the internet was the webseries *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. The webseries consists of one hundred episodes broadcasted on a Youtube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/LizzieBennet>), which were uploaded and posted from April 9, 2012 to March 28, 2013. It was produced by

² The literary adaptations cited also have their own adaptations: *Bridget Jones's Diary* to the cinema, in 2001, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, to the cinema, with release set for 2015 and *Death comes to Pemberley*, to television, in 2013.

Bernie Su and Hank Green, of Pemberley Digital, a company specialized in adapting literary works onto webseries:

An innovative web video production company that specializes in the adaptation of classic works onto the new media format. The company utilizes not only YouTube but other social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Pinterest, LinkedIn, LOOKBOOK, and others to tell an enriched and immersive story that transcends across multiple formats. (Pemberley Digital, 2014)

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries is Pemberley Digital's first effort, which, besides *Pride and Prejudice*, has already made adaptations of *Emma*³ and *Sanditon*⁴, by Jane Austen, *Frankenstein*⁵, by Mary Shelley and, currently, is broadcasting the *Little Women*⁶ adaptation, by Louisa May Alcott.

The webseries proposes interactivity with the audience as characters from the show participate in social media, having accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Pinterest. In these virtual spaces the audience sent messages, received answers from the characters, thus establishing a new relation between audience and characters.

In addition to the main videos that presented the story of *Pride and Prejudice* settled in a contemporary world, it was also broadcasted parallel videos that enriched the narrative with stories of the supporting cast, like *The Lydia Bennet Diaries*, with 29 episodes; *Maria of the Lu*, with 7 episodes; *Gigi Darcy: Domino*, with 6 episodes and *Collins and Collins*, with 8 episodes. Also, ten episodes in which the characters answered questions and commentaries sent by the audience through their youtube channel or through social media.

Pride and Prejudice and The Lizzie Bennet Diaries

³Emma Approved, with 70 episodes, posted from October 7, 2013 to August 21, 2014.

⁴Based on Jane Austen's unfinished novel. The webseries 'Welcome to Sanditon' aired 27 episodes and was broadcasted at Pemberley Digital's channel from May 9, 2013 to August 12, 2013.

⁵ Frankenstein MD, with 24 episodes, posted from August 9, 2014 and October 31, 2014.

⁶ The March Family Letters, released on December 24, 2014.

Jane Austen's works are known for narrating love stories with happy conclusions. However, her novels present an apparent naivety. A more careful reader realizes that behind the romantic stories, there are a lot of irony and criticism, mostly severe, to the society she lived in.

In all of her works⁷, Austen presents witty dialogues and caricatured characters, which is the case of Mrs. Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, who, during all the narrative searches incessantly husbands to her five daughters. The character puts herself and her daughters in embarrassing situations. These plot situations are the means that the author use to expose her criticism to women's limited position, as they could only have a decent future and social acceptance by the ways of marriage.

Pride and Prejudice tells the story of the Bennet's family, and has as its main character Elizabeth Bennet, the second of the five daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. In its opening lines, Austen presents the tone of her narrative: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." (AUSTEN, 2007: 201). In other words, a book that ironically deals with the institution of marriage and how it is perceived by those living in that society.

The narrative opens with the arrival of new residents to Netherfield, a manor located in the neighborhood: Mr. Bingley, his older sister along with her husband, his younger sister Caroline Bingley and the family friend Mr. Darcy, a private, proud and haughty man. Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy are both young bachelors and very wealthy. Therefore, all the single young women and, specially, their mothers, see in both of them an opportunity to marriage, including Mrs. Bennet.

⁷ Six novels: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), *Northanger Abbey* (1818), *Persuasion* (1818). A theater play *Sir Charles Grandison* (written between 1791 and 1792 and published in 1980). Three short stories: *Lady Susan* (1794, 1805), *The Watson* (1804) (unfinished, her niece Catherine Hubback finished it, published it as *The Younger Sister*, in the mid-19th century) e *Sanditon* (1917) (unfinished). Besides her juvenilia works: *The Three Sisters*, *Love and Freindship* (sic). (1790), *The History of England* (1791), *Catharine, or the Bower* e *The Beautiful Cassandra*.

At a ball, everyone is introduced. Bennets' first born, Jane, is singled out by Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth, however, overhears Mr. Darcy's derogatory comments about herself. From that moment on, the young lady decides that he is the most obnoxious man she had ever met.

Later on, arrives in town a charming militia officer named George Wickham. Soon, he and Elizabeth form an acquaintance, and Wickham narrates facts that condemn Mr. Darcy's character, contributing even more to the repulsing feeling Elizabeth had been nurturing from him. To increase her aversion towards the young man, she discovers that he, alongside Miss Bingley, were the ones responsible for the departure of Mr. Bingley, a fact that had left Jane desolated.

In a reunion, Mr. Darcy confesses love for Elizabeth and begs her hand in marriage, but she refuses it. Disappointed, Mr. Darcy writes a letter in which he clarifies some issues. The contents of the letter leaves the young woman bewildered and changes her perception about him.

Meanwhile, the youngest Bennet's daughter, Lydia, elopes with Mr. Wickham, leaving everyone else desperate, mostly concerned for the girl's reputation. The couple is found and, by an agreement, is then married. After some speculations, it is found that the responsible to finance and intermediate the agreement was Mr. Darcy.

In the end, Mr. Bingley returns and proposals to Jane, just as Mr. Darcy, once more, declares his love for Elizabeth, who, this time, returns the affection back to the young man.

The *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* adaptation takes place between a university town in the USA and San Francisco, nowadays. The story is told in vlog-style by the eponymous main character, who, alongside her best friend Charlotte Lu, produces videos as part of her thesis from her master in Communications program. In the first episode, Lizzie says that while her main concern is entering the job market after finishing her masters, her mother's is to get her daughters married. Both the novel and the webseries begin with the same sentence. In the

first episode, the opening scene shows Lizzie reading in a t-shirt, her mother's gift, the sentence.



Figure 1: Images of the first episode, in which Lizzie show the t-shirt that her mother gave to her, with the sentence that opens *Pride and Prejudice*. (The Lizzie Bennet Diaries, 2014).

Lizzie says that her mother's big concern is that she and her two sisters, Jane, the eldest, sweet and generous merchandise coordinator in the fashion world, and Lydia, the youngest, an impulsive and reckless community college student, find good husbands.

Just like the original novel, the narrative opens with the arrival of new residents to the neighboring house: Bing Lee, a medical student who is friendly, pleasant, but completely manipulable; Caroline Lee, Bing Lee's sister and family friend, William Darcy, a proud and very private entrepreneur.

For contemporary society, the relationship with marriage changed. The woman plays a role in modern society that is not limited by the household environment, as it was in the XIX century, because she has other priorities. Therefore, to create verisimilitude, the webseries change the focus of the narrative: instead of center it in issues like marriage, it switches the story to entering the job market.

An example of this change of focus can be noticed when, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Collins, Bennets' cousin, a dull cleric, proposes to Elizabeth. She refuses it. He, then, proposes to her friend Charlotte Lucas, whom accepts it. Elizabeth scolds her friend for accepting the proposal of someone so disgusting. Miss Lucas justifies herself by saying that she was getting old and that a better proposal would not come around. On the other hand, in the webseries, Mr.

Collins is the owner of a production company who offers a good job to Lizzie, who in turn refuses it believing that such job, would limit her talent; meanwhile her friend Charlotte Lu accepts the same offer. Lizzie criticizes her friend, saying that such position would limit her creativity. Charlotte justifies herself by saying that her family is going through a critical financial situation and that she could not afford to wait a better job offer.

One can observe these timeline adjustments where it alludes to the meaning of Pemberley in another passage. On the original novel, Pemberley is Mr. Darcy's estate, where he and Elizabeth meet again, as she is visiting the property. In the adaptation, however, Pemberley is Darcy's company, where Lizzie works as a trainee. It is also the place where the couple re-acquaintance.

The most critical moment on the original novel happens when Lydia Bennet and George Wickham elope. After Mr. Darcy offers a lot of money to the soldier, he marries the Bennets' younger daughter to guarantee that the lady's honor remained intact. Nowadays, a young couple eloping is not that shameful. Therefore, in the adaptation, Wickham does a *sextape* of Lydia and threatens to release it over the internet. To solve that matter, Darcy buys the company that owns the website where the video is hosted and then destroys the recording, guaranteeing that Lydia would not undergo a 'humiliation' process.

These adjustments aim to keep the verisimilitude and a similar reflection that is being proposed: acceptance by the society of what it considers appropriate and what it means to have the honor and good moral established. In *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* episode that Lydia comments about her video, she and Lizzie question the audience about their judging position. What criteria and with which level of integrity the audience addresses that matter. The same occurs in Jane Austen's text. In the original, the passage that points out such reflection happens when Mr. Collins writes a letter to Mr. Bennet and offers him and his family advices on how to ignore and abandon their "unworthy child": "Let me advise you then, my dear Sir, to console yourself as much as possible, to thow off your unworthy child from your affection forever, and leave her to reap the fruits of her own heinous offence". (Austen, 2007: 355)

Thus, the adaptation moves the issues addressed by Jane Austen's novel in time and in space. The role of women in society has changed, but there are still several issues to be criticized, as the allocation of guilt to those women victims of sexual violence. Austen also criticized the stratification and prejudice between social classes, a matter that still resists the contemporary times.

From the adjustments made into the adaptation it is possible to realize that the issues troubling the nineteenth century English writer persist and continue today. From these reflections, the text is revisited and its narrative remains appropriate to contemporary reflections.

Final Considerations

Transmedia adaptation expands the possibilities of presenting a narrative. Maintaining the essence of an artwork corresponds to the respect of issues that the artist predisposes to discuss with his/her work. Therefore, the displacement of time and space can be seen as a possibility for maintaining the essence of the work, and not as an impasse.

The transformations that society lives indicate that artistic production needs to respect these streams, experimenting and presenting new readings to well-known works. New ways to communicate, especially virtually, become tools that enable experimentation of new languages and ways of making art. Marcuschi states that this understanding is not new,

Surely, these new genres are not absolute innovations, such as creations above, without something that links them to other existing genres. The fact has been noticed by Bakhtin [1997] that talked about genre 'transmutation' and the assimilation of a genre by another genre, creating new ones. (Marcuschi, 2002)

The development of new genres and the use of new platforms may be powerful allies to make new audience feel interested and wishful to know classic artistic productions. In addition, it makes it evident that a real value of an artwork does not vanishes or gets lost over the years.

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