From Jane Austen to Hollywood to Bollywood


Both books focus on issues of enduring concern to adaptation studies—the vexed question of fidelity, the notion that there is something called an “original” text, and the ways in which adaptations are shaped by social, political, and cinematic conditions of production. *The Cinematic Jane Austen* consists of nine essays by the three contributors, focusing on how filmmakers have tried (and mostly failed) to find cinematic equivalents of Austen's unique stylistic technique. John Wiltshire's two contributions (“Jane Austen: Sight and Sound” and “Jane Austen, Technology and the Heritage Film”) suggest that while Austen is not an explicitly visual novelist, her citations of the visible encourage reader participation: “Dramatic presentation (or ‘realism’) is at the forefront, but—again like the cinema—hidden meanings and significances lie in what the reader derives by inference from what is already shown” (37). Wiltshire's second essay criticizes many filmmakers for failing to appreciate Austen's “initial and continuing impulse [...] to render the ordinary ‘anxieties of common life’ and to deflate ‘the charms of romance’” (55). Instead they focus too much on the kind of visual effects—soft lighting, sweet music—that transforms the novels into modern-day Gothic tales. This, Wiltshire argues, is prompted by the desire for “safety and community,” which he believes is characteristic of modern-day commercial cinema (55).

Ariane Hudelet looks at Austen's use of gestures, “which remain discrete on the structural level [...] but which nevertheless manage to convey an idea, a feeling with a concision and intensity that are closer to cinematic techniques than to theatrical ones” (67). Hudelet subsequently discusses how filmmakers recreate such details by means of sound and gesture. Her second essay looks at Austen's visual imagery—the use of mirrors, body language, and the importance of looking. The fifth essay—again authored by Wiltshire—looks at how filmmakers have shown Mr. Darcy smiling, something noticeably absent from Austen's text, which “seduces the reader into taking Elizabeth [Bennet’s] point of view [...] the reader has no time to spare on the other side of her confrontations” (110).

While the analyses in each chapter offer penetrating insights into Austen's technique and how filmmakers have responded to it, there remains an implicit assumption that fidelity is the most important issue in adapting a novel for the screen. Any adaptation
that challenges this notion is considered somehow "inferior." Hudelet's essay "Jane Austen as a Cross-Cultural Icon" looks at works like *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), in which "References to Austen are [...] incorporated [...] into the very objects and conventions which regulate our social behavior today" (158). Hudelet seems somehow perturbed by this, as she observes how such films reinvent Jane Austen "as a cultural mix of literature, film and individual imagination, [which] can sometimes be felt to eclipse the 'original' texts [...] and to substitute for them a vague mythical concept whose 'fundamental character' [...] is to be appropriated" (159). Wiltshire is firmly convinced that fidelity in adaptation "actually enhances the appreciation of a film," particularly for audiences acquainted with the Austen novel from which it derives (161). In spite of its professed aim to offer "a fresh approach" to Austen adaptations, *The Cinematic Jane Austen* contains little or no references to the recent theoretical work done in adaptation studies, which encourages us to look at an adaptation as a text in its own right, shaped by forces other than the desire for fidelity. This approach produces some rather eccentric judgments—for example, the belief that adaptations such as Robert Z. Leonard's *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) are somehow "inferior" because they were based on a stage-play (by Helen Jerome) rather than Austen's text: "[The film presents] a more democratic, a more American version of England, which diminishes the novel's stress on class distinctions" (97). No attempt has been made to show how Leonard's "American version of England" was shaped by studio demands. Since the mid-1930s MGM had enjoyed a string of hits with classic adaptations such as *David Copperfield* (1935) and *Wuthering Heights* (1939): *Pride and Prejudice* was clearly planned along similar lines, with a starry cast (Olivier, Garson) and a simplified plot.

As one might expect from a film studies specialist, Carolyn Jess-Cooke's *Film Sequels* offers a completely different approach to adaptation. She argues that in today's globalized film world, concepts such as fidelity and originality no longer hold sway; in common with other film industries, Hollywood is chiefly governed by "the profit principle," which Jess-Cooke defines as analogous to the Freudian pleasure-principle in which "subconscious forces compel individuals to repeat events over and over again regardless of how painful or traumatic these events may be" (9). This is a suggestive analogy, as it helps us to understand how (and why) producers have consistently relied on the same formats to attract audiences and maximize profits. Jess-Cooke also argues that audiences actively welcome film sequels, which offer them the chance to engage and predict the narrative in new (yet highly familiar) contexts, "each of which generates dialogue amongst audiences and establishes interpretive communities, such as chat rooms, web blogs, fandoms and 'fanfic' efforts to create sequels to existing sequels and/or originals" (10). In a world of proliferating sequels, produced by audiences as well as filmmakers, it seems rather unnecessary to refer to issues of fidelity. Jess-Cooke suggests that audiences consume texts in different ways, shaped by their specific socio-cultural backgrounds, a fact that
proves vital “not only in understanding the assertion of cultural values in the face of globalisation and homogenisation, but, amidst such rapid global transitions and historical developments, in re-considering our relationship to the past” (128).

_Film Sequels_ shows how the sequelizing process dates right back to the earliest days of silent film, when serials such as _Who Will Marry Mary?_ (1913) were quickly followed by _What Happened to Mary_. In the post-1945 period the Japanese cycle of horror films and their sequels proved especially popular, as they charted the developing relationship between America and Japan: “Godzilla began as the ultimate alien who, as the series continues, became a friend to Japan, an insider, ‘one of us’” (38). Jess-Cooke argues that the sequel came of age during the blockbuster era of Hollywood in the mid-1970s. Partly this was due to politics: the Rambo series represented “a screen fantasy of re-enactment and return, or Vietnam: the sequel” (47). Sequels also became popular as a result of postmodernity—“a philosophical engagement with shifting notions of originality, reproduction, simulacra and re-presentation” (47). _The Matrix_ cycle offers an obvious example. Jess-Cooke subsequently analyzes the sequelization process within a specific sub-genre—the slasher film, which she believes offers a means “by which we can interpret the mediation of traumatic events,” while simultaneously offering the chance for “generative interactivity and consumption” on websites such as YouTube and MySpace (69). Slasher films are not only commercially profitable; they help to create “communities of catharsis” in the wake of real traumas. _Film Sequels_ ends with an analysis of how Bollywood reconstructs its own versions of Hollywood successes, and subsequently initiates a two-way process of exchange and thereby permitting “fluidity between individual networks” (107).

_Film Sequels_ provides another contribution to a growing body of work identifying adaptation as a creative process that not only involves screenwriters, but every member of the viewing audience as well. There are some notable lacunae in Jess-Cooke’s text: I’d have welcomed more historical analysis of the sequelizing process in Hollywood. Are there any comparisons to be drawn between the blockbusters of today and the endless cycle of ancient historical films produced in Hollywood in the fifteen years after the end of World War II? And what about the Universal horror cycle of films; did their audiences respond in similar fashion to today’s slasher film viewers? Clive Young’s recent book _Homemade Hollywood_ (2008), which charts the growth and development of fan films since the 1920s, suggests that this is certainly the case. Nonetheless _Film Sequels_ is an absorbing book, to be recommended to anyone interested in cutting-edge approaches to adaptation.

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