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**Books and Letters in Joe Wright's
Pride & Prejudice (2005):
 Anticipating the Spectator's
 Response through the
 Thematization of Film Adaptation**

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In *L'Adaptation cinématographique des textes littéraires* Michel Serceau argues that filmmakers and film critics have often considered film adaptation in terms of binaries like translation/creation, faithfulness/originality, transcription/interpretation, etc. (13-20). Wright's film clearly tries "to assert that it is the 'real' *Pride and Prejudice*" (Hudelet 124) while emphasizing that it is a *personal* work which the director says he "put [his] heart into" [62:50].¹ Wright claims not to have seen the BBC series of 1995 (Hudelet 107). I want to look at the ways the film, at a metafictional level, thematizes the process of adapting a literary text to the screen, and how the film justifies its conception of film adaptation in relation to the response it anticipates from the contemporary spectator. I will start by showing how the representation of reading books is based on an opposition between a critical and sensitive reading and a reading that merely takes in a dominant discourse, an opposition which reflects, at a metafictional level, the distinction film critics have often made between a creative adaptation and an adaptation that is a mere transcription of the source text. I will then deal with the representation and function of letters, which likewise participate in this thematization of adaptation, but also point at the difficulty of film, as a medium, to capture text in a dynamic way.

1. Reading Books: Critical and Sensitive Readings vs. Reproductions of Dominant Discourses

In Joe Wright's film, two characters, Elizabeth and Mary, are depicted reading books, while a third, Mr. Collins, offers to read a book to the Bennets and delivers a sermon in church. Mr. Bennet is shown reading the paper after the ball [44:00], and certain shots underline that Mr. Bennet is associated with books spatially [74:10, 113:20], but this pattern mainly points at one of the things he and his favorite daughter, Elizabeth, have in common.

Elizabeth first appears on screen reading a book that, if we are to believe Joe Wright's commentary, happens to be Jane Austen's novel [1:25]. Indeed, the reverse shot over Keira Knightley's shoulder does not focus enough on the letters to make the text readable, even by zooming in on a DVD player. But when the shot is enhanced digitally², the text appears to be a variation on the last lines of Austen's novel with only the names of characters and places changed. (I have put the names used in Austen's text in brackets).

With their relatives [the Gardiners], they were always on the most intimate terms. Candy [Darcy], as well as Katherine [Elizabeth], really loved them; and they were both ever sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the persons who, by bringing her into Wiltshire [Derbyshire], had been the means of uniting them. (cf. Austen 388)

Elizabeth is then shown in a close-up, smiling and bringing her hand to her mouth before closing the book. She behaves in a similar manner later on in the film when she closes a book that, the director tells us, happens to be *Fordyce's Sermons* [70:05], a conduct book recommended by Mr. Collins as it "speaks eloquently about all matters moral" [27:10]. This parallel suggests not only that Elizabeth is amused by the text she's reading, but that she is capable of making a critical reading, of establishing a certain distance between herself and a text.³ Note that the second time she is shown reading, she also shuts the book, this time in order to counter Darcy's authority; he has just stated that an "accomplished woman . . . must improve her mind by extensive reading" [20:20]. What Elizabeth is opposing is the normative character of Darcy's words, as well as Caroline Bingley's, which seem to have been taken straight out of a conduct book.

Elizabeth is not only a critical reader but a sensitive one as well. By sensitive, I mean that Elizabeth engages emotionally and aesthetically with art. "Culture" and "appreciation of beauty," the director indicates [80:15], bring Darcy and Elizabeth together, just as Jane and Bingley both agree they don't have time to read [8:10]. The first thing Elizabeth says to Bingley is that she's heard "the library at Netherfield is one of the finest in the country" [8:10], and she will indeed be shown reading there [19:15]. As one of the indispensable qualities of an "accomplished woman," her interest in reading shows that despite appearances—despite her family—Elizabeth is a well-educated person. If Miss Bingley is capable of reciting almost all of the characteristics of the "accomplished woman," she only attempts to show she has that "something in her air and manner of walking" [20:15], Caroline being, according to Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard, an "upper middle class" woman doing "her best to ape [her] betters" (203). Elizabeth does not read because it is required of a lady but because she has a genuine

taste for it, a distinction which explains why she shuts the book: unlike Caroline, she refuses to even attempt to incarnate such “a fearsome thing to behold” as an “accomplished woman” [20:30]. Nor does she mix reading and socializing, unlike Lady Catherine who, having stated that “music is her delight” and that “there are few people in England who have more true enjoyment of music than [herself], or better natural taste” (the key words are “true” and “natural”), starts talking the second Elizabeth starts playing the piano [60:00]. Elizabeth’s interest in art will be confirmed when she looks at the statues at Pemberley by herself rather than following the housekeeper on a guided tour [79:05]: remember that the housekeeper tells her to “keep up,” a comment which suggests that Elizabeth needs time to appreciate art. Just as Elizabeth seems to be impressed with Darcy’s appreciation of art, Darcy himself seems to be attracted by the fact that Elizabeth truly enjoys reading and doesn’t just say so; indeed, it is Darcy, not Miss Bingley, who mentions reading, giving a sidelong glance at Elizabeth right after Miss Bingley passes in front of him to impress him with “her manner of walking.”

That being a sensitive reader is not incompatible with having a critical mind is suggested in the first ball scene, when Elizabeth mocks the quality of what her mother considers to be the “very pretty verses” written by one of Jane’s former admirers: “I wonder who first discovered the power of poetry in driving away love” [12:20]. Not only does this scene show her capable of mocking a text written by a subject—an upper class man—more powerful than she is, but it also gives her the opportunity to mock Darcy’s naively romantic remark: “I thought that poetry was the food of love.” Elizabeth’s retort—“Of a fine stout love, that it may. But if it is only a vague inclination, I’m convinced one poor sonnet will kill it stone dead”—suggests she is capable of delivering a critical reading of a text even if it is meant to be sensitive. If she is “romantic,” as Charlotte says [53:05], it does not make her naïve, unlike Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, who attempts to see the world through the filter of Gothic romance.

That the book she’s reading is a *variation on the book on which her story is based* establishes, at a metafictional level, a distance between the film and the source text that, Elizabeth’s smile seems to suggest, is ironic.⁴ For more than simply alluding to the source text, this *mise en abyme*—i.e., the relation of similitude a part of a work has with the work it belongs to—is a signal that the actress will take her cue from the novel all the while modifying certain aspects: significantly, she has reached the *end* of the novel and she is shown *closing* it. This image seems to construct the star of the film, Keira Knightley, as a synecdoche of the film as a whole. Wright’s film clearly establishes a contract with the spectator, announcing that, although based on Austen’s text, the film will leave the novel aside in order to create something different: thus, the adaptation the spectator will be given to see is not a transcription of Austen’s text—the words are out of focus—but a *creation*. I want to insist that this reading is only possible when the film critic has access to the peritext, information outside of the film such as that provided by the director’s commentary. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the way the film’s reception is represented and conditioned by the film and the spectator’s actual response, due not only to the spectator’s own cultural limitations but also to the film’s own limitations, in this case because of what the director did not put in or make clear.

I also want to make a second point concerning the use of the out-of-focus effect. Nicole Cloarec and others have pointed out that these first shots construct Elizabeth as the main “point of view” (194). Without completely disagreeing with them, I nevertheless want to suggest that the shot of the book does not completely enable the spectator to see what Elizabeth sees: not

only is it not a POV shot, but the out-of-focus effect establishes a barrier between Elizabeth as a focalizer and the spectator, underlining that, because of its very nature—i.e., for technical reasons (hence, the use of the focus)—the medium does not enable us to see what the character perceives. The cause of her amusement will thus remain a mystery to us.

The two other characters who are directly associated with reading books are Mary and Mr. Collins. Mary seems to possess some of the qualities of an accomplished lady: she plays the piano-forte, reads and enjoys conversation, but she is also portrayed as a dull and rather pathetic figure, notably when she comments that conversation is so much better than dancing to get to know people. She is often heard dutifully practicing her scales, and her piano-playing and singing seem to lack emotion [40:35, 43:55]. Unlike Elizabeth, Mary lacks humor and takes things very much to heart (e.g., her poor success at the ball [42:55]) and very literally (“Who’s got warts?” [4:10]). At the end of the film, she is shown reading to her sister Kitty [102:45], and in his commentary Joe Wright explains she is reading *Fordyce’s Sermons*. The dull, scholarly tone she takes while reading this conduct book suggests she is quite literally taking Mr. Collins’s advice: the film suggests, and Joe Wright asserts in his commentary, that she would have been willing to marry the preacher [47:40]. Mary’s reading indicates an absence of a critical mind and a readiness to submit to an instrument of power used by the dominant gender and class to subject and fashion women. At a metafictional level, it suggests that a faithful reading of a text is dull for a girl like Kitty, who is the same age (seventeen) as a large part of the audience *Pride & Prejudice* is targeted at, and whose *reaction*—a sigh—is heard *before* the shot allows us to see the scene and before we even hear Mary’s words. Put in relation to the scene where, smiling, Elizabeth shuts the very same book, as well as the film’s opening scene, this scene argues the case against film adaptation as faithful transcription.

Mr. Collins appears at the Bennets’ door holding several books [25:10] and offers to read from *Fordyce’s Sermons* “for an hour or two” after dinner [27:05], but he is not shown reading until the church scene where he makes the blunder on “intercourse” while reading his own notes laid out over a book that is probably the Bible or the Book of Common Prayer [64:10]. The dullness of his preaching—the scene starts with a top spinning on a bench and cuts to a medium close-up of Charlotte with a young man sleeping behind her [64:00]—gives an idea of what the Bennets’ listening to him read from the conduct book must have been like, apart from mocking the occasional blunder. But Mr. Collins is often shown referring to a much more important source, Lady Catherine [35:30, 46:05], who owns a parakeet and a parrot of her own [57:05, 59:50]. I would argue that Mr. Collins is a vessel for the discourse of power, a discourse that tries, albeit unsuccessfully as his slip of the tongue suggests, to repress certain aspects of his personality, notably his sexuality, but which he nevertheless attempts to apply to the letter. That he fails to be the perfect incarnation of Lady Catherine’s expectations may explain why he does not take Mary for wife when she is the most perfectly suited for his needs but instead attempts to woo the attractive Jane, the fiery Elizabeth, and finally Charlotte, who has some of Elizabeth’s subversive qualities.

Joe Wright’s take on film adaptation is in keeping with the opposition between faithfulness and creativity according to which directors and critics alike have almost always conceived film adaptation. The originality of Wright’s film lies, rather, in the relative coherence of its representation of reading books as a metafictional treatment of film adaptation and as an attempt to anticipate and maybe even condition the spectator’s response. If adaptation were to be mere

transcription, then one would get a perfectly dull film: one would get Mary or Mr. Collins, a film which simply attempts (and fails) to apply the authoritative text to the letter, not Elizabeth, a critical and sensitive reading. Of course, this coherence has its limitations and shows that the very idea that a film could condition the spectator's response by representing the response it anticipates is utopian.

2. Letters: Action and Reaction

The difficulty of adapting text to film is made explicit in the use of letters, which, Joe Wright points out in the DVD commentary, are “really difficult things to dramatize. They're quite boring in terms of film” [51:00]. Apart from when Elizabeth writes to Jane, the camera never focuses on the actual text of the letter, but on the letter as *carrier* of the text: as far as the film is concerned, the sheet might as well be blank. When Darcy writes letters at Netherfield [19:15], the discussion bears little on their content—they are quite simply “letters of business”—but on the quality (the speed) of Darcy's writing, from which Caroline Bingley is trying to distract him. Darcy's ironic remark toward Caroline further underlines how much time and “room” (on a sheet of paper) words take to write while Caroline has already expressed her “raptures at [Georgiana's] beautiful little design for a table” twice: “I've already told her once by your desire. . . . Perhaps you will give me leave to defer your raptures till I write again. At present, I have not room enough to do them justice.” Yet, if the scene opens with Miss Bingley's remark—“You write uncommonly *fast*, Mr. Darcy”—Joe Wright's film repeatedly demonstrates that one of the problems with representing the writing and reading of letters on film is that it *slows down* the pace of the narrative. This kind of delay occurs when an extreme close-up shows us an ink pen writing “Dear Jane” and we hear Elizabeth speak these very words *after she's started but before she's finished* writing them [62:30]. That she's interrupted by Darcy's sudden intrusion, a first and failed desperate attempt to ask for her hand, says Joe Wright [63:25], further argues the case that film narrative has no time for tedious letter-writing and progresses, rather, through action and dialogue.

Letters *are* used, however, as objects that make the narrative progress, if only because they deliver invitations [14:45] or announce the departures and returns of various characters. When he receives the letter announcing Mr. Collins's arrival [24:40], Mr. Bennet is first shown looking down at the letter he's holding, then looking up when he reports its contents to Mrs. Bennet, while Jane and Elizabeth observe him in the background. (Significantly, he glances at the letter briefly when he speaks the word “addition,” the glance associating, by metonymy, the letter to its author, Mr. Collins, while the word “addition” refers to the latter's financial power as he is to inherit the estate—an addition can be a part of the house that has been added, and in French, an “addition” is a check at a restaurant.) When Jane receives Miss Bingley's letter announcing their departure [49:40], we are shown Elizabeth's verbal and non-verbal reaction (close-up) to her sister's mute reaction (reverse shot) to having read the letter, held in her hand, that she lets fall at her side (close-up). Written (and even spoken) language is replaced by body language—as occurs quite literally in the following scene [49:50] which, Ariane Hudelet seems to believe, “illustrat[es] the contents of the letter” (66). In other words, in order to “read” a letter, the *mise en scène* puts the characters in a position where they can observe and react to each other's reactions, while the succession of shots puts the spectator in a similar position; neither Elizabeth nor the spectator needs to hear her sister explain the contents or articulate her sorrow: all that is needed is to look at her face, then at the letter.

There are also occurrences where a character does in fact read a passage from a letter out loud. In the subsequent scene where Jane hands Caroline Bingley's letter over to Elizabeth [50:50], the latter, after reading a few sentences, gives her interpretation of Miss Bingley's words: "Caroline sees that her brother is in love with you and is taking him off to persuade him otherwise." This instance again portrays Elizabeth as a critical reader capable of reading between the lines of a text, unlike her sister Jane who seems to be satisfied with a literal reading: "But I know her to be incapable of willfully deceiving anyone. It's far more likely that he doesn't love me and never has." Once again, the characters' reactions and interpretations take up more time and more "room" than the actual letter. But it seems to me that, at a metafictional level, this scene seems to be arguing for the very necessity of using the characters as *interpreters* of an original text: it is not at all certain that all early-twenty-first-century spectators would perceive the implicit meaning of the letter. Indeed, characters are often used to explicate the gravity of a situation in cultural terms. For example, Elizabeth's explanation to Charlotte that "the estate is to pass directly to [Mr. Collins] and not to us poor females [the Bennet daughters]" due to the gender conventions of her time is meant not so much for Charlotte, who would surely be familiar with those conventions [24:50], as for the contemporary spectator. Here is another instance where film adaptation as transcription is shown to be untenable; in the light of cultural differences, interpretation appears as the only viable solution.

Letters are employed more dramatically in the second part of the film. When Elizabeth visits the newlywed Collins, the contents of the letter she has written to Charlotte to announce her arrival, and which refers to a letter she previously received from Charlotte, are related in a voice-over [54:20]. Although Elizabeth is not even shown writing the letter, this device is so common in cinema that the spectator gets the point as soon as he hears the heading "Dear Charlotte." But the subsequent scene plays on this artificiality by opposing the profilmic level (i.e., what is in front of the camera: Elizabeth is already arriving) and the voice-over, which allows us to see the scene through the prism of an audio flashback, so to speak. The spectator does not even wonder at such a temporal impossibility; in a sense, it is as if two texts (and two times) were superimposed: the letter and the action of arriving. The letter is thus represented as an anachronism, lagging behind the moving image.⁵

The scene where Darcy brings his letter to Elizabeth [71:00] also uses a device common in film-making in order to adapt the epistolary form: the spectator can hear the writer's voice, presumably heard in the reader's mind. But I would suggest that the montage severely deconstructs this device by not delineating Darcy's voice at the profilmic level from the voice-over. He is shown first speaking to Elizabeth, then impossibly *speaking the letter*, Darcy's lips moving as he says, "I will not renew the sentiments. . . ." This tactic adds to the scene's melodramatic quality by making Darcy's presence ghostly. By the time Elizabeth has started reading Darcy's letter, the latter has already vanished. Again, this scene seems to prove that reading letters merely delays the progress of the narrative, as if the time spent reading the letter were quite literally *wasted* time. If in the preceding scene the "voice over" corresponded to a scene in the past, a sort of audio *flashback*, this time the reading of the letter corresponds rather to a *flashforward*, but even so, the action nevertheless catches up and *overtakes* the reading of the letter. The shot showing Darcy riding off on his black horse only emphasizes the time that is wasted reading letters as the heroine's lover is traveling increasingly out of reach. Along with

the previous voice-over scene, this is the only time where the spectator is allowed to hear the contents of a letter without the mediation of a character's interpretation. The point is, obviously, for the spectator to realize that Elizabeth's critical readings and interpretations are not always right and to make his own interpretation. Indeed, unlike in the scene where Elizabeth reads Miss Bingley's letter, and unlike in the novel (Vol. II, Ch. XIII), her interpretation is quite literally silenced: she shares the letter with no one, not even her sister Jane, another difference from the novel (Vol. II, Ch. XVII). The spectator must, then, rely on his own judgment, as is suggested by the scene where Charlotte, the addressee of the previous letter read in voice-over, enters the room and Elizabeth hides the letter from her. This time the letter is not only an object which underlines, through the use of the focus, Elizabeth's baffled pride at having misjudged Wickham and Darcy; notably, it has become a text which empowers the spectator to perceive Elizabeth's own prejudices.

In the last section of the film, letters are mainly used for dramatic effect. In the scene where Elizabeth receives the news of Lydia's elopement, the letter is once again used as an object to create suspense [87:05]. Not only does the spectator, like Darcy and the Gardiners, have to wait for Elizabeth to come out of her quarters and share the news with them (long shot), but they all see her tearful reaction (reverse medium shot) first while the contents remain unreadable on the white sheet, and they are made to wait even longer as Elizabeth quits the room to regain her composure for the sake of decorum. Once again, the actual text remains elusive and the emphasis is placed on the characters' reactions and interpretations of its contents, Mr. Gardiner's stating for the contemporary spectator's benefit that such an elopement could "ruin[] the family forever."

The letter is used, yet again, to increase suspense when the Bennets receive news from their uncle concerning Lydia and Wickham [89:45]; once again, the suspense is, at a diegetic level, a consequence of social conventions. Mary prevents Kitty from opening the letter, saying, "You can't do that, you're just a baby." The letter would quite literally fail to disclose its meaning if Mr. Bennet were not here to receive it. After summarizing its contents, Mr. Bennet and then Elizabeth interpret the meaning in terms of social conventions for the sake of Jane, another stand-in for the spectator. In this scene, the letter is explicitly represented as a vehicle for patriarchal discourse; by focusing on the characters' reactions, the camera focuses on the *effects* of power. This emphasis harks back to the scene at Netherfield where Darcy is writing letters⁶ while Elizabeth is reading a book, thus respectively to producing and receiving texts. This opposition between men who write and women who read, however, is not maintained throughout the film. Darcy is shown reading a letter while Caroline Bingley, Elizabeth, Jane and Mary [27:20] also write letters—though in the case of the first three, their letters are all directed to women, and we do not know whom Mary's text is meant for.

It could be argued that in the film, unlike in the novel, the representation and the function of letters is shown to be antithetical, in the sense that the function of the letters as objects does serve to advance the plot, but the showing of text would tend to slow the narrative down. Furthermore, by placing emphasis on the characters' reactions to and interpretations of letters, Joe Wright's film seems, at a metafictional level, to argue, once again, in favor of film adaptation as interpretation, not transcription, because of the medium *and* because of the cultural differences. By making such an argument, Joe Wright somewhat places himself in the position of an *auteur* who appropriates the source text, like Fellini with *Fellini – Satyricon* (1969),

adapted from Petronius's text. Wright, however, is humble (or realistic!) enough not to call his film *Wright – Pride & Prejudice* and merely dares to replace the “and” in Austen's title with an ampersand!

NOTES

1. Time is not always exactly the same from one country to another; there can be a difference of a few seconds. This DVD is the French version.
2. I want to thank Anne Berton-Rouhette for providing me with an enhancement of this shot.
3. It is, by the way, significant that she reads this book at the very moment when she's calling herself into question, i.e., applying her critical mind to herself. It also quite obviously recalls her readiness to mock the “ridiculous” Mr. Collins, when she herself will admit at the end of the film that both Darcy and herself have behaved like “fool[s]” [113:35].
4. Compare this scene to Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), where Belle sums up her favorite book which also anticipates her own story to come. There is in the animated movie, however, no attempt to “film” the text and little or no irony in Belle's reaction to a text she seems to take quite literally; if the townspeople see her as different it is because she reads, not because she has a critical mind.
5. There is a similar effect in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), in which Jonathan Harker is shown already on board the train to Transylvania when he reads Dracula's letter inviting him there.
6. One of the titles on the soundtrack is “Darcy's Letter.”

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