

A lasting performance: Jane Austen

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Abstract

The text focuses on an exploration of the ways in which body, politics and history — categories rather subdued and kept at bay in Jane Austen's fiction— are represented in contemporary film and television adaptations of her novels, when the iconic and the visual are used as a means to inscribe the missing link between an old, elusive discourse and its painfully, almost frustratingly new consumers. Also, I would like to show how this new iconicity feeds from the powerful place of authority within the institution of literature and reinforces it in return.

Key Words: Representation, Performance, Body, History, Politics.

I

An archaic portrait of a young girl looms from the cover of the *Times Literary Supplement* dated March 13, 1998. Her figure consumes the page, as if she and she only is the literary supplement of the day; the rest of the page —mostly titles and captions— seems but a secondary addition, almost literally trampled underfoot, or underhand, by the smiling girl with a parasol. The very fact that she adorns the cover of a prestigious literary newspaper gives her an extra-prominence: the portrayed figure quite obviously belongs to the sacrosanct institution of literature and is in some sense essential for its functioning.

The caption printed within the framework of the portrait, however, disturbs the placid dominance of the portrayed figure. Executed in huge lettering, it slashes through the girl's hair and violates the representation, saying: «Is this Jane Austen?» Ambiguously enough, the portrayed figure is identified as Jane Austen precisely at the moment when the identity is questioned: the anonymous smiling girl of the portrait is recognised at the moment when recognition becomes dubious, suspect, susceptible to inquiry. Jane Austen —the canonical name of the history of English literature— is both given and taken away, she remains strangely suspended, never fully recognised, opening painful wounds of attribution. Appearing on the cover of the

Times Literary Supplement, the illustrious medium of the institution of literature and its scholarship, the portrait indicates the painful wounds on the body of the institution itself: it speaks about literature hyperconscious of its elusive and deceitful inheritance, yet craving incarnation, recognition, a soothing knowledge of its past.

The ambiguous *TLS* cover announces the central article in the issue: a two-page article by Claudia L. Johnson on the debatable authenticity of the so called Rice Portrait of Jane Austen. Interestingly enough, the question of attribution is not related to the authenticity or authorship of Austen's *texts*, but to the veracity of her *image*. While Austen's texts seem safe and secure in the capable hands of the guardians of the literary institution, her image remains evasive and uncertain. The only two verified semblances appear in the form of rather unpolished drawings by her sister Cassandra, yet scholars question their authenticity too, so that no firm scholarly consensus can be reached. Despite an obvious yearning on the part of the academic community to fix and sanction one single and uniform effigy of the great author, there seems to be no general understanding, and the debate continues. The very article on the authenticity of the Rice Portrait invited a letter to the editor, in which another Austen expert —Deirdre LeFaye— contested the findings of Claudia L. Johnson (LeFaye, 1998).

Although the debate about the authenticity of the Rice Portrait of Jane Austen is in itself an interesting affair brimming with historical intricacy, it elicits more general questions. One such question is by all means the nature of this singular desire on the part of the British academic community to fix and sanction one reliable and credible picture of Jane Austen. Claudia L. Johnson identifies the source of this desire in the communal project of the English national identity:

What did Jane Austen look like? If this question were posed about any other author, with the possible exception of Shakespeare, it would arouse little interest outside a small circle of scholars. But since the First World War, Austen has been much more than a major author. A wide public is passionate and opinionated about virtually everything that pertains to her. [...] Such sensitivity is not surprising. After all, Jane Austen is an English national treasure, and quite a lot depends on how we permit ourselves to imagine her, on what we think her image is (Johnson, 1998: 14).

However, as she proceeds with her arguments in favour of the Rice Portrait as the credible and reliable effigy of Jane Austen, Claudia L. Johnson narrows her scope, cutting the communal and a thoroughly public project of the English national identity down to a highly restrictive institutional quest. The question is no longer «What did Jane Austen look like?», but rather

How was Austen created as a literary figure out of the recollections and anecdotes originating from different branches of the family? Which branch eventually claimed to have privileged access to the true image? How were Austen

and her relics institutionalised? Who is authorised to speak for her, and to whom, ultimately, does she belong? (Johnson: 14).

The Rice Portrait debate is thus but the tip of the iceberg: it foreshadows the problem of the iconic authenticity of Jane Austen in all its aspects. To the host of Johnson's questions, I would add some more, all of them dealing with Austen's iconicity. What exactly depends on how we permit ourselves to imagine her, on what we think her image is? In what sense would a permitted image affect our reading of her texts —because it is her texts, rather than her portraits, that earned her a place in the competitive hierarchy of the literary canon? As if a positively iconic Jane Austen—the real portrait, the authentic smile or scorn, or indeed a certified replica—could and would effectively disclose whatever has remained invisible and suppressed in the novels and letters written by Jane Austen, giving us all a privileged access to her truest image, to her palpable relics and to a powerful place of authority within the institution of literature. As if an access to the visual representation of *her* body could and would fill in various gaps in the body of her texts resisting *our* interpretation—gaps prescribed by the eighteenth century *decorum* and propriety that she adhered to, such as the absence of direct references to a character's body or to the politics of the given historical moment. The visual representation of the author seems to be the key to the silences of her discourse, bridging the gap between what remains unsaid in Austen's letters and novels, and the need of contemporary readers to focus their readings of old texts on essentially contemporary notions of body, politics and history.

What I would like to do in this paper is to explore the ways in which body, politics and history—categories rather subdued and kept at bay in Jane Austen's texts—are represented in contemporary remakes of her novels, when the iconic and the visual is used as a means to inscribe the missing link between an old, elusive discourse and its painfully, almost frustratingly new consumers. Also, I would like to show how this new iconicity feeds from the powerful place of authority within the institution of literature and reinforces it in return. The Rice Portrait debate is in this sense a potent parable for an overall cultural and institutional impact of a visualised Jane Austen in our decade: the impact of the plays based on her novels and the significance of an unprecedented proliferation of Hollywood films and the high-profile TV series, even the relevance of consumers' reactions to designs for the dust-jackets appearing on new editions of her books.

II

The visual body of Jane Austen has grown considerably in the past decade. Within the span of just a few years devoted readers of the six finished novels by Jane Austen have been offered a profusion of iconic remakes. To mention but the most prominent ones: Amy Heckerling translated, or rather transplanted, the quaint textual *Emma* to the hectic teenage movie world of Bev-

erly Hills, in *Clueless*; Douglas McGrath directed a film version of *Emma* fully respectful of its historical otherness, with Gwyneth Paltrow cast as Miss Emma Woodhouse; Diarmuid Lawrence directed a TV version of *Emma*, in which Emma is embodied by Kate Beckinsale. *Sense and Sensibility*, directed by Ang Lee and written from Austen by Emma Thompson, triumphantly won its Academy Award and conquered cinemas on both sides of the Atlantic; and, last but not least, one cannot neglect the huge success of the grand-scale BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*, with Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle cast as Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet.

As a result of such visual plenty, the characters of Jane Austen's fiction have become iconic and resonant speaking bodies, actively engaged with the discourse they deliver, claiming our attention. In a strange transference, the voice of Elinor Dashwood moves into the visual representation of the body of Emma Thompson and uses it as a resounding chamber; the same happens with Marianne Dashwood and Kate Winslet, Edward Ferrars and Hugh Grant, Fitzwilliam Darcy and Colin Firth. The fading of the bodily features in Austen's novels is in the new, visual versions of her texts replaced by the vibrant new representations which see the body as the necessary site of discourse. Although in most cases (with the exception of Heckerling's film) the late eighteenth century *decorum* of the utterance is sustained and preserved, iconic representation of the actors' bodies introduces a possibility of imbalance, subversion, action possibly improper, forbidden, dangerously sexual. The dangerous sex drive introduced by the representation of the actors' physique is all the more significant if one bears in mind that all Austen's novels deal with one subject, and that is premarital courtship.

In his essay entitled «Figuring the body in the Victorian novel» J.B. Bullen says that his choice of Jane Austen might seem perverse «since in her writing the human body seems hardly to feature, and her characters are never memorable for their physical appearance. Consequently, her heroes and heroines are remembered for what they do and think rather than for what they look like, and Austen's images of the body are so pale that they seem to be but faint traces in the narrative» (1997: 254). In order to reinforce his conclusion that Jane Austen is wary of signifying bodily details, J.B. Bullen quotes Carol Shields, who

amusingly points out there are no fingers, toes, hips, thighs, shins, buttocks, kidneys, intestines, wombs or navels in Jane Austen, and in all her works there is one chin, ten ankles (mostly sprained), one liver, seven elbows, four shoulders, two noses, ten ears, eleven legs, two wrists, six knees, two eyebrows, four eyelashes, and seven breasts, five of which belong to men, and only two to women (Bullen, 1997: 254-5).

Yet two items are missing from this catalogue of the signifying bodily details absent from Jane Austen's writing: hands and eyes. The rhetoric of courtship and seduction in Jane Austen is not altogether bodiless: the sophis-

ticated discourse is wed to the agent of utterance in a careful choreography for the symbolic sexual load of the meeting eyes and the meeting hands. Hands and eyes are decorous and proper, they function as a socially sanctioned synecdoche for the body in courtship, their choreography follows the seductive turns of the linguistic performance. The danger introduced by the migration of Austen's discourse into new, resonant chambers of visual representation is therefore less a betrayal of the original, true Jane Austen than a case of re-vision and difference in degree. A difference in degree, however, can still operate in terms of historical otherness: today, Austen's decorous bodily synecdoches pass unnoticed and unobserved, failing to elicit active recognition. Just as is the case with the controversial Rice Portrait of the author herself, a recognition today requires a full-length representation in which the signifying cameos of hands and eyes are stretched into voluminous bodies echoing loudly the long-lost voice of the original Jane Austen.

In the book about the making of the BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* Andrew Davies describes the process of the adaptation of the novel into a screenplay. When commenting on the revised, visualised Elizabeth Bennet, in the figure of Jennifer Ehle, Davies says

we were all keen to grapple on to an aspect of her that is very vivid and clear in the book, but often ignored by critics, commentators and interpreters of Elizabeth, which is that she is a very active, lively girl, not just mentally but also physically. Again and again she is described as running out of the room, or rambling through the countryside, and so on. [...] I'm not sure how far people would agree with me, but I almost think that this is a coded way of Jane Austen telling us she's got lots of sexual energy. This is probably what appeals to Darcy, unconsciously at any rate, who is used to some very artificial females (Birtwistle, Conklin: 4).

Davies proceeds to describe the scene in which Elizabeth is portrayed walking and running three miles, all the way to Netherfield, in order to see her sister. Both Austen and Davies emphasise her appeal to Darcy, whose commentary on Elizabeth's appearance is again based on the synecdoche of eyes: Darcy remarks that her eyes «were brightened by the exercise» (Austen 1993: 33; Birtwistle, Conklin: 4). Eyes brightened by the exercise can thus still be a proper, socially sanctioned rhetorical device acknowledging sexual attraction, but now necessarily amplified in the sonorous body of Jennifer Ehle.

The 1995 BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* is an ideal case-study for the problem of the representation of body in Jane Austen's fiction and its visual transference. The publicity which accompanied the whole project even before it was actually set in motion clearly points out to the presumed gap between Austen's chastity—which, in this case, presupposes the lack of nudity and the representation of bodies via safe eye-hand synecdoches, the rest safely covered in clothes—and what they called «full frontal nudity and daring sex scenes» (Birtwistle, Conklin: vi). Sue Birtwistle, the producer of

the series, was quick to defend her project. However, in doing so she was trapped into a paradox: while flatly denying nude sex-scenes in her production, she was forced to admit that both Austen and her production were indeed based on the question of erotic attraction. So she says, «No doubt, we made a mistake when we described the novel as sexy; what we meant, of course, was that Darcy staring at Elizabeth across a room is exciting, that Darcy and Elizabeth touching hands the first time they dance is erotic. What we did not mean was naked bed-room scenes» (Birtwistle, Conklin: vi).

The paradox is again based on the difference in degree which generates historical otherness: Austen's representation of the body might indeed be exciting and erotic, but it fails to elicit an active recognition of sexiness. The recognition of a very twentieth-century notion of sexiness, that is, requires a deconstruction of the archaic eye-hand synecdoche and a respect for the visual potential of film, which —except for highly avant-garde pieces— cannot sustain a synecdochic representation of the body.

The sequence of Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley operates as a potent parable of recognition through a complex series of visual representations. While touring the northern part of the country with her aunt and her uncle, Elizabeth decides to visit Darcy's home at Pemberley, but only after she made sure that he was not there. During their visit to Pemberley, the housekeeper takes them to the gallery and shows them a full-length portrait of Darcy. It is at this point —while gazing at the portrait— that Elizabeth recognises the «real Darcy», the one she will eventually marry. In Jane Austen's words,

Elizabeth walked on in quest of the only face whose features would be known to her. At last it arrested her —and she beheld a striking resemblance of Mr. Darcy, with such a smile over the face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen, when he looked at her. She stood several minutes before the picture in earnest contemplation, and returned to it again before they quitted the gallery. [...] There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance (239).

The portrait —the iconic Darcy— seems more potent than the original, rendered in the text through a series of eye-and-hand synecdoches. It is the iconic representation which moves Elizabeth, thus setting in motion the closing half of the novel; its potency is clearly indicated by the ekphrasis¹ which includes emphatic words such as «quest», «arrest», «striking resemblance», «earnest contemplation», «return». When —on her way out of the house— she stumbles upon the original Darcy, her embarrassment and her recognition are secondary and supplementary, they are an effect rather than the cause, because she has already emended her interpretation of his character.

1. Ekphrasis: the literary device that allows verbal art to represent visual art; the description of a work of visual art.

Andrew Davies has rewritten the scene so as to fit both the requirements of the film as a different medium and the sensitive historical otherness of the text he was building on. Because the two Darcies one encounters on film are both iconic, it is the difference between the one and the other rather than the ekphrastic description of the portrait which triggers off the crucial recognition and the decisive interpretation. It is worth noting that the difference between the two visual Darcies in the film version of *Pride and Prejudice* depends again on two different representations of his body: the static formal Darcy of the gallery portrait is contrasted with a representation of a dynamic Darcy on horseback, sweating his clothes or soaking them, while diving in a lake. In Birtwistle's words, «by intercutting Elizabeth staring at his portrait with the flesh-and-blood Darcy the audience sees, one is able to point up the idea that there are many portraits of Darcy being formed in the story, as Lizzy tells Darcy herself at the Netherfield ball: "I hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly"» (1995: 5).

In the diving sequence his body is both visible and invisible, it paradoxically acts underneath the clothes, so that the costume functions as a kind of mobile screen simultaneously revealing and concealing, frustrating yet encouraging recognition and interpretation —a counterpart of the very screen on which the film itself is shown. This other representation is therefore not the one of a nude body, but of a body struggling for representation, or rather defying the representation itself, just as is the case, on a different level, with the synecdochic bodies in Jane Austen's text.

It is curious and certainly worth noting that it was not the representation of Darcy's frontal nudity but the very struggle of the body for or indeed against representation which consequently generated yet another recognition or interpretation of his character. This sequence seems to have promoted a strange transference, in which the representation of the clothed, struggling body of Colin Firth as Mr Darcy violated its own bounds and started operating in a reversed direction: Colin Firth has become recognised as Mr Darcy beyond the limits of *Pride and Prejudice*. In the *Vogue* interview with Colin Firth, for instance, Nick Hornby identifies him as «Mr Darcy» (1997: 201) and «a sex god off the telly» (1997: 202). Describing Firth's role in a film based on his novel —yet another transference!— Hornby uses the Pemberley swimming sequence as a film-icon that all his readers are familiar with: «In *Fever Pitch*, the man famous for smouldering in a wet white shirt is forced to wear a pair of lurid Arsenal boxer shorts, shout swearwords out of windows, and do all sorts of things that might deter Elizabeth Bennet and the 12 million viewers who fell in love with Mr Darcy» (1997: 202). In an *Elle* interview with Jasper Rees, Firth is said to be «best known for his portrayal of Jane Austen's sartorially immaculate sex symbol» (1997: 107). In both cases the violation of the bounds of representation —a strange transference of Darcy onto Firth— follows from the sequences in which the iconic representation of the body is significantly frustrated by the bounds of represented clothes, costume, a doubly intervening screen. Both cases, moreover, openly

acknowledge the paradox: a sex symbol is «sartorially immaculate», «smouldering in a wet white shirt». The costume, just like the screen itself, seems to be the catalyst of the bodily performance, in its theatrical, its linguistic and its sexual mode.²

III

The portrayal of bodies in Austen and the contemporary adaptations of her novels, however, introduces yet another subject, and that is the politics of representation. Many critics have emphasised the fact that Jane Austen is apolitical. Although she lived in the turbulent era of Napoleon's conquests and defeats, her novels and diaries make no mention of the political turmoil. Yet the very marriage market that she is perpetually involved with in all her novels necessarily foregrounds the politics (of representation). Once the marriage market has been recognised as the principal interest of story-telling, representation itself participates in the political impact of matchmaking. The theatrical, the linguistic and the sexual performance of her characters is therefore a social act as well, by which the representation itself affects and is affected by the transactions on the marriage market.

Curiously enough, the marriage market of Jane Austen's novels reflects neatly the politics of adaptations of her novels for film or television. In other words, Austen's novels too are goods on a film or TV market; by managing to preserve their appeal, they are never short of suitors in guise of film and TV producers. Just like Austen's heroines, her novels are charming, appealing and enjoyable, and are likely to attract money. Indeed, Austen's plots operate as highly functional parables of their own consumption; they portray heroines on the marriage market and are themselves goods attracting eligible admirers —readers, viewers, writers, producers.

The BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* proves again an ideal case-study. The comparison between the first chapter of Austen's novel and the introductory chapter of the book on the making of the TV version of *Pride and Prejudice* (Birtwistle, Conklin, 1995) reveals a striking resemblance. The novel opens with one of the most famous sentences in English literature, introducing the theme of marriage: «It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife» (1). Chapter I is in its entirety devoted to the arrival of a rich bachelor and the matchmaking designs of the neighbouring families. The introductory chapter of the BBC book on the TV adaptation of this novel describes the first meeting of the producer and the writer, who are both passionate about the book and want to do it for TV, but first need to raise money to implement the project. Only after a painful and exhausting fund-raising is their

2. For the convergence of the theatrical, the linguistic and the sexual in the very word performance, see Felman 1980.

passionate admiration for the novel in for a performance (Birtwistle, Conklin: v-viii). Performance, in other words, is impossible without desire and power, be it a connubial success of Elizabeth and Darcy, or a BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*. This neat parable about the workings of a plot and the process of its production exposes, however, some profound differences between the politics of representation in Jane Austen and the politics of representation of its contemporary adaptations.

The rhetoric of Jane Austen and the symbolic capital of her fiction rests on a sophisticated lesson about successful marriages and a marital stability in a frustratingly intricate social structure. There is no doubt that her fiction was in the early nineteenth century perceived as educational, in many respects. It educated both her heroines and her readers in the art of courtship and in other social skills, pointing out to the countless traps of communication. By singling out the traps of communication as one of the principal themes of her fiction, however, Jane Austen exposes her own discourse and invites a critical reading, extending the lesson to her own performance. The balance of her plots and the sheer excellence of her narrative act—which presuppose stability, security and permanence—are thus paired with the interpretive traps presupposing indecision, reservation and scepticism.

The sophisticated subversion of one's own performance, as a way to imply a deep-seated instability of social structures, is in a new, visual Jane Austen achieved in a radically different way. Her frequent usage of ironic or even paradoxical mode of narration is in the contemporary adaptations replaced by a series of iconic interventions into the body of Austen's discourse. Narrative irony of the original medium is in the new medium supplanted by a series of iconic metaphors. The gaps which open in Austen's discourse are filled up with the iconic accessories, brilliant visual cameos undermining and upsetting a delicate balance of Austen's marital plots.

Apart from adapting *Pride and Prejudice* for the new BBC production, Andrew Davies adapted also Austen's *Emma* (directed by Diarmuid Lawrence, produced by Sue Birtwistle). The two adaptations betray some strikingly similar strategies of the politically charged iconic fill-up, in contrast with the seemingly credible and successful social plots. In both conversions, as it were, the limited world of Austen's class is supported by the iconic implants of the underprivileged: servants, grooms and attendants. These iconic implants are usually paired with the representation of major social events and performances, such as balls. In Austen's fiction, balls represent social events inviting premarital performance, they are the site of courtship. «To be fond of dancing», says Austen at one point, «was a certain step towards falling in love» (6). Dancing in Austen is therefore a rehearsal of those social skills which help preserve marital etiquette and social stability, so that its importance cannot be exaggerated. In the politically charged iconic implants, however, a mass of servants absent from Austen's fiction is shown mimicking their masters' performance, mocking its power and its authority. *Their* dancing is drunk and disorderly, transgressing the bounds of propriety.

Consequently, dancing is shown as a highly subversive act, jeopardising rather than preserving the orderly social narration.

In Austen's *Emma*, for instance, reports on two successful wedding ceremonies literally envelop the text of the novel: Emma's report on the wedding of Mrs Weston opens the novel, and Mrs Elton's report on Emma's wedding closes the text. In Davies's adaptation of *Emma*, however, these two narrative check-points are further enveloped by two iconic implants, showing thieves trespassing the bounds of Mr Woodhouse's estate and stealing his chicken, under cover of the night. The two stabilising performances —those of the marriage ceremony— are here supplanted by two destabilising acts, involving transgression, crime, offence, sin. As if to show that the bright and sparkling narration of Jane Austen rested on obscure violations, a sly and cunning disrespect of (social and interpretive) laws.

Another segment inviting iconic implants not necessitated by the original text are costumes. While this may be true of any costume drama or period piece, in the case of Jane Austen it becomes more consequential. Her specific, synecdochic representation of the body on the marriage market presupposes clothes to screen off —yet show— the goods which are not to be seen. Since the clothes themselves perform in such cases as the very screen of representation, any intervention in this domain is of special significance. As J.B. Bullen says,

though actual bodily parts may play little part in Jane Austen's writing, yet the body itself does have a prominent function. It enters in not as flesh and muscle, exposed and naked, but clothed and respectable. It comes not as a visceral object, but as a sartorial one, and her women in particular are deeply conscious of the language of what Carlyle later called «the world of clothes» (1997: 255).

The body in Jane Austen, according to J.B. Bullen, «is displaced onto the clothing that covers it» (1997: 262).

The costume designer for *Pride and Prejudice*, Dinah Collin, discusses her designs in metaphorical terms. She says she had wanted «pale colours and creamy whites for the Bennet girls, to reflect both their zest and their innocence», and «keep the darker and richer colours and exotic fabrics for characters like the rich and extravagant Bingley sisters or Lady Catherine de Bourgh» (Birtwistle, Conklin: 47). The very phrases she uses for the choice of the colour and the fabric are based on politically charged metaphors: rich colours and exotic fabric are reserved for the richest and the most imperial characters, whose performance in the story rests precisely on their dominant social status. The predatory nature of Lady Catherine de Bourgh is highlighted, for instance, by a visual detail: her dining room is decorated by huge paintings of birds, «some live and others after they have been slaughtered, in various attitudes of death» (Birtwistle, Conklin: 54). In the later scene, when Lady Catherine confronts Elizabeth and forbids her engagement to Darcy,

she wears a hat decorated with a small dead bird.³ The televised representation of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, moreover, was based on a portrait of Queen Caroline. The portrait, we can see, is once again the basis for a recognition and a tool of performance, now primarily in the context of social power. Almost as if one came full circle, back to the cultural performance of the Rice Portrait of Austen herself.

IV

The closely connected issues of the representation of the body and the politics of representation, in the fiction of Jane Austen and in various recent adaptations of her texts, attest eventually to one single point: that the canonical status of Jane Austen and her lasting performance depend on a desire for a prolonged recognition, which once and again proves more powerful than the past and its otherness.

The effort to recognise and to thus bridge the historical gap between the old text and its new consumers lies at the very heart of various readings of Jane Austen. Recognition is in this sense the very basis of representation. The relics on which to build on are scarce, refurbished and unreliable, just as is the case with the remaining portraits of Jane Austen. Also, the traces of the past —scarce, refurbished and unreliable— are immensely difficult to find; it takes time to unearth an era, history is time-consuming.

The story about clothes and costumes works again as a powerful parable. Dinah Collin, the costume designer for the BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice*, describes her job in terms of time and effort it takes to find the sources and re-present the era. «It is a very laborious process, gaining access to collections», she says, «you have to write letters and arrange appointments because they have very limited time for viewings» (Birtwistle, Conklin: 48). The laborious process and a limited time allowed for viewing of the relics of the past is further accompanied by their utmost fragility and the unstoppable process of waste and loss:

I found some original clothes from this period, but they were often very, very fragile. Until the 1970s we used them extensively, but now these outfits are just too delicate. A lot of them have been put into what are called «viewing rooms», which is useful for research because if you haven't got that as a basis from which to draw, then you're lost (Birtwistle, Conklin: 50).

The limited time for viewing suggests also a limited time on which to build recognition and representation. The representation of the past rests thus on a temporal paradox: the long time of history is in a way echoed in the very time-consuming effort to represent the past. Also, the very movement of

3. See Barbara Leigh-Hunt on her costume (Birtwistle, Conklin: 54).

film liberates, in Fredric Jameson's words, «the contents of the image itself for a more *historical* and *social* intuition of Being» (1990: 192, emphasis added). Hence the very time of filming and viewing the takes reflects the temporal labour of history itself, so that the overflowing, repletive time of the TV series responds better to the time-consuming historicity of the visual adaptation than does the succinct time of a feature film. This is especially true of the so called costume dramas or period pieces based on a cultural politics which literally takes time, because it rests on a regular repetition of social events and rituals. In Jane Austen, for instance, the story operates precisely within the framework of *a series* of balls and *a series* of long visits, and underlines their repetitive character. The repetition and its long time are essential for the social practices in Jane Austen, so that a six-part TV series can capture the temporal dimension usually lost in the limited duration of a feature film. Just as Elizabeth needs to return to Darcy's portrait, in order to examine his features and determine the true meaning of his character, so does the audience need time to return, once and again, to the world of fiction of Jane Austen, in order to examine its minutest details and determine the true meaning of all her cunning repetitions. In other words, a reliable interpretation of history requires a full-length portrait and a lasting performance.

Of course, historical gaps and discontinuities are likely to hinder recognition, no matter how fully long the exposure may be or how lasting the performance. As if —however paradoxically— it takes precisely the gaps and discontinuities to prolong the performance and make it last. The Rice Portrait debate continues, as do various readings and adaptations of Jane Austen's fiction. The only truth universally acknowledged is that a reader in possession of a VCR must be in want of a peek at Jane Austen.

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