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# FROM *EMMA* TO *CLUELESS*: IRONIC REPRESENTATIONS OF JANE AUSTEN<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This essay discusses the constructions and functions of irony in Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), a contemporary and loose filmic adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816). The analysis reveals that Heckerling plays with the intersection of past and present and parodies, through an explicit ironical look, both Austen's and our contemporary world.

Keywords: irony; parody; adaptation.

A first great distinction between Diarmuid Lawrence's (1996) and Douglas McGrath's (1996) adaptations of *Emma* and Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995) is related to the acknowledgment of the 'original' source, Austen's novel, in the construction of the adapted text, and consequently the question of faithfulness to what they consider to be Austen's world and values. Whereas the period-piece adaptations make great efforts to reconstruct and recreate Austen's past village life in pre-industrial England in minute details—attention is given to historical locations, accurate period decor, authentic dances, period music, food, costumes,

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hats, wigs, make-up and hair design (see, for instance, the books *The Making of Pride and Prejudice* and *The Making of Jane Austen's Emma*, which attest, through research and consultation with specialists, the 'historical authenticity' of such films)—a contemporary loose adaptation like *Clueless* does not even mention Jane Austen in the credits. This lack of concern with origins and authorship (at least as it relates to Austen) is decisive for a consideration of *Clueless* and the relations it creates with both Austen's novel and the allegedly 'faithful' adaptations.

Although *Clueless* does not mention Jane Austen or the novel in the presentation of credits, any reader of *Emma* (or viewer of a more "faithful" translation of the novel) will immediately perceive certain "coincidences" between both texts, all located on story-level:

1. Like Emma, Cher (the main female character in *Clueless*) also plays the role of a matchmaker;

2. Similarly to Emma's family life, Cher's mother is dead (she died during a routine liposuction), and she lives with her father (a lawyer who earns five hundred dollars an hour), with whom she also has a sort of protective, patronizing relationship;

3. Cher's relationship with her stepbrother—Josh—reminds one of Emma's relationship with her brother-in-law, Mr. Knightley;

4. Cher's decision to "adopt" Tai, a classmate who belongs to a lower social class, so as to "improve" her, finds a parallel in Emma's relation with Harriet Smith;

5. Both Emma and Cher are members of high-class society: Emma belongs to early nineteenth-century English gentry society, and Cher to high-class twentieth-century American society;

6. Both Emma and Cher go through a process of self-discovery that includes their falling in love.

Several other parallelisms are created between *Clueless* and Austen's *Emma*: Emma's rude remark towards Miss Bates finds an equivalent in Cher's confusing her maid's origin country—El Salvador—with Mexico. Cher also tries to arrange a match between Tai and Elton, who is, instead, interested in her. At a party where Cher and Christian dance, Tai is left alone and Josh (though awkwardly) dances with her. This echoes the moment in the *Emma* ball when Mr. Elton refuses Harriet for a dance, and Mr. Knightley "saves" her from the embarrassment, inviting her to dance. Christian also protects Tai from the Barnies at the mall, an echo of Frank Churchill's "saving" Harriet against the gypsies in *Emma*.

Despite such parallelisms, some of which are responsible for the creation of irony (as I will discuss below), what mostly calls one's attention in this film is its deliberate intention to depart from Austen's *Emma* so as to create a completely different text. As such, the title already illustrates such a departure. And differently from the so-called period film adaptation, *Clueless* takes place in Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, in twentieth-century times. This aspect immediately makes the viewer wonder how Jane Austen can "fit" (or has the director's intention been to make her "dissonant with?") such a context. Theorists who have elaborated on the question of adaptation usually refer to three possible types of relationship available to the filmmaker when transposing the novel to the screen. Brian McFarlane, in his *Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, quotes Geoffrey Wagner, who suggests the following categories: (a) *transposition*—"in which a novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference;" (b) *commentary*, "where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect . . . when there has been a different intention on the part of the film-maker, rather than infidelity or outright violation;" (c) *analogy*, "which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art" (10-11). *Clueless* certainly exemplifies the third category. But though it departs considerably from *Emma*, the intersection with Austen's novel, even if unacknowledged, is still there. This implicit dialogue between some

aspects of Austen's past and Heckerling's present also affects the expression of irony, mainly because irony in the twentieth century differs significantly from irony in late eighteenth-century.

If we consider Alan Wilde's classification (discussed in *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Post-Modernism and the Ironic Imagination*), Austen's (mediate) irony, though bearing the function to satirize, to ridicule, to laugh at the world around her, is inserted in a context in which the ironist still believes in the moral, psychological, and interpersonal dream of wholeness. That is why an ordered pattern ("all is well that ends well") always characterizes Austen's endings. Conversely, as we all know, the twentieth century puts an end to this dream of wholeness; in its place we only find disorder, uncertainty, absurdity, instability and contingency. Thus irony in our age contributes to shatter this conception of totality and closure, and replaces the belief in the possibility of recovery and harmony for a dream in (ironic) play. Awareness concerning such issues helps to determine both our reading and our evaluation of *Clueless* as to questions of 'quality' and more mass-culture adaptations.

Reviews and articles about the adaptations of *Emma* in the 1990s usually show the opposing opinions that Heckerling's film gave rise to. In commercial terms, "*Clueless* was a sleeper hit, grossing more than \$55 million domestically," as Kim Masters, in "Austen Found: Hollywood Rediscovered the 19th-Century Writer," informs (*Washington Post*, 1995, G1). The following quotations from reviews and articles show the contradictory viewpoints about *Clueless*. In "So Genteel, So Scheming, So Austen," Janet Maslin refers to *Clueless* as "a deliriously pop version" of *Emma* (*New York Times*, 1996, C1); in "Remarks on Jane Austen and the Period Film," Gabrielle Finnane qualifies *Clueless* as "a bright contemporary translation of *Emma*" (*Metro*, 1996, 6); in "The Dumbing of Emma," Anthony Lane talks about "the daffy shape of 'Clueless,' a variation on the theme of 'Emma,'" and opposes it to what he refers to as "the real thing—'Emma,' adapted and directed by Douglas McGrath" (*New Yorker*, 1996, 76); in "'Emma' Rings True To Jane Austen's Novel," David Sterritt considers *Clueless* as "the most

original of them all [he is referring to other Austen adaptations]" (*Christian Science Monitor*, 1996, 11). In "The Austen Versions: Recent Films," Jocelyn Harris refers to *Clueless* as a "brilliant and funny movie" (429), whereas Donald Lyons complains that "[Austen's] masterpiece, *Emma*, was cutely shrunk to comic-book size this summer by Amy Heckerling in *Clueless* and is slated for proper adaptation soon" (*Film Comment*, 1996, 41). In "Verbal Concepts, Moving Images," Brian McFarlane qualifies *Clueless* as "a sweet-tempered, if simple-minded, reworking of *Emma*," though he later admits that Heckerling's film is "sharp and witty (...) and affectionate", he adds that "[it] will more than do until the real thing comes along shortly" (*Cinema Papers*, 1996, 31). Many other reviews would also be revealing of such different viewpoints concerning *Clueless*, but what is clearly at stake in the critics' negative evaluations of Heckerling's film is the question of (lack of) "truth" and "fidelity" to Austen's world—as the opposition between "masterpiece" (Austen's *Emma*) and "comic-book size" (Heckerling's *Clueless*), as well as the expression "proper adaptation" in Lyons' comment attest. Besides, the use of "real" to refer to period-piece adaptations, and to distinguish them from *Clueless*, masquerades the fact that all of these films are textual recreations; the notion of "real" does not apply to one more than to the other. Actually, what critics mean is that without a historical authentication that may link it to Austen, *Clueless* is merely a pop version, more mass-culture product than the other films. Such a consideration is also a consequence of the fact that *Clueless* is a film originally conceived to be addressed to teenagers, having its literary and filmic roots, as Esther Sonnet in her analysis "From *Emma* to *Clueless*" informs, "in the critically despised 'teenpic' genre that emerged in the mid-1950s as a result of the fragmentation of mass cinema audiences into age-specific consumer groups" (51).

These notions actually disguise the fact that the other supposedly "proper adaptations" are also remakes and aesthetic replays and are also inserted within a context of mass, popular culture. As Sonnet argues,

*Clueless* proposes a quite different relation to its textual 'origin.' It does not signal itself as 'past' and therefore does not cue in the 'gentrification effect I have argued typifies those 'literary' adaptations that make up 'highbrow' popular cinema. Instead, the resolutely contemporary setting of *Clueless* plays as much against its source as it does with it (60).

"Play" is actually a key concept in the discussion of *Clueless*, for what it does is to play with the possibility of making a film with different textual strata, not only semantically, but historically and culturally speaking – consisting of residues from different times and places, even if these are not always explicitly shown. Despite the parallels pointed out above on the level of story between both texts, Austen's *Emma*, in *Clueless*, consists of a quotation, an ironic quotation.

Because *Clueless* is not a period adaptation, it is crowded with references to themes and topics that have gained prominence in contemporary debates: drugs, adolescence, sexuality, virginity, ethnicity, divorce, violence, ecology, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, breast cancer, education, stereotypes, consumerism, fashion. But none of these are discussed; on the contrary, they are merely alluded to, or literally, but loosely, quoted, thus also constituting ironic quotations in the film's context. As the main setting for *Clueless* is a high-society secondary school (or should I say a shopping mall?) in Beverly Hills, contemporary Los Angeles and times, very often the school board shows words like "discrimination," "suffragette," "subjugation," "poverty," and "destitution." The irony is that these topics remain as distant as possible from the students; they exist merely as signs, words written on the board, or on characters' (such as Josh's) T-shirts.

As *Clueless* represents a considerable departure from Austen's *Emma* and from the period-piece versions of the novel, it illustrates in my view a kind of ironic vocabulary that aligns with Richard Rorty's conception of the ironist as discussed in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. He describes an ironist as a person who "has radical and

continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses (...)” (73). The ironist thus expresses herself through redescription, through “playing the new off against the old” (73). In opposing irony to common sense—“to be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative vocabularies” (74) – Rorty characterizes the ironist as one whose vocabulary is contingent, fragile, doubtful, always subject to change. These notions in my opinion make the reading of irony in *Clueless* at least twice as complex because considering that to re-describe is to ironize, what *Clueless* does is to re-describe an already highly ironic text, a fact that makes it doubly ironic.

The playful and ironic tone of *Clueless* is pervasive from the beginning to the end of the film. The use of Cher as a first-person narrator is decisive for the play of incongruities between verbal material and the images shown. Cher’s voice-over at the beginning of the film introduces it thus: “So OK, you’re probably thinking, ‘Is this, like a Noxema commercial, or what?’ But seriously, I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl. I mean I get up, I brush my teeth, and I pick out my school clothes.” The equality Cher suggests between the film (*Clueless*) and a commercial is already symptomatic of the incorporation the film makes of other communication technologies through references to, and quotations from, other media, like: **1. Television**—Josh usually criticizes Cher for her lack of concern with what is happening around the world and for her preferences to watch cartoons; thus, cartoons are usually considered trivial, in opposition to the news, taken as serious television. The film also plays with advertisements, as in the case of the “freshmaker.” **2. Video**—as when Cher and Christian (that would correspond to Frank Churchill in *Emma*) watch Stanley Kubrick’s 1960 *Spartacus*. In *Clueless* Christian is gay, a fact which tunes in with the theme of homosexuality in Kubrick’s film, some of whose scenes were censored in the original release because of their covert homosexual implications (Finnane, *Metro*, 6); **3. Cinema, literature, theatre, adaptation**—Two examples are revealing: the

first relates to Cher's quoting of Shakespeare's verse "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May but thy eternal summer shall not fade" to put it in Miss Giest's pigeon-hole (Cher is also a matchmaker in this version; she wants to make Miss Giest believe that a supposed lover has put the verse there). Dionne asks Cher whether she has written that and Cher says "it's a famous quote ... from Cliff's notes." Actually, Cher's/Cliff's 'verse' corresponds to two lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, which starts as "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?:" line 3—"Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May" and line 9—"but thy eternal summer shall not fade." Interestingly, the new editing of Shakespeare's lines into one single verse also reflects a mass-market impulse to re-arrange, as if in a collage, so-called canonical texts/authors. The other example refers to Heather, Josh's girlfriend, when she mentions Hamlet saying "To thine own self be true." The dialogue goes like this:

Cher: Ah, no, uh, Hamlet didn't say that.

Heather: I think that I remember Hamlet accurately.

Cher: Well, I remember Mel Gibson accurately, and he didn't say that. That Polonius guy did.<sup>2</sup>

These two instances reveal how the literary text—most of times considered superior both to the criticism written about it and its adaptations—is at present mediated by mass-culture experiences and diverse cultural discourses; Cher remembers Shakespeare's quote not from her reading of Shakespeare, but from Cliff's notes. Likewise, she remembers Hamlet not from her reading of Shakespeare's play, but from her memory of Mel Gibson playing his role. These examples also illustrate the lack of concern with origins and authorship already commented above in relation to the film *Clueless* itself, in whose credits a reference to Jane Austen's novel does not appear.

To further analyze the matter of *Clueless* as constituting an ironic re-description of Austen's *Emma* I would like to concentrate now on what I consider to be a very substantial instance of ironic quotation from Austen's text. I refer to the moment when Cher takes a picture of Tai, and Elton asks her for a sample and sticks it in his locker.<sup>3</sup> The scene directly relates to the one in Austen's novel, when Emma draws a portrait of Harriet, and Mr. Elton praises Emma's ability as drawer and painter. Several implications arise from that change: for one thing, taking photographs as a substitute for drawing/painting is a way of signalling the move from a so-called high-artistic technique and expression (drawing/painting) to a mass-popular activity (photography), that lacks (at least in Cher's case as photographer) the standards of "great art." This scene might be enlightened and its discussion further elaborated by a reference to Walter Benjamin's much quoted text on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," mainly the passage dealing with photography:

(...) for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense (669-670).

That is why the reader of Austen's *Emma* cannot help laughing at the "photography scene" in *Clueless*, which, to a certain extent, allows the discussion concerning the matter of artistic reproduction, including Heckerling's film itself as an ultimate and concrete attempt at reproducing, in another place and time, Austen's *Emma*. In the novel's context, the reader may admit Mr. Elton's praise of Emma's painting—which still possesses what Benjamin calls "aura"—"that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (668)—the element that attests to the authority, uniqueness, and

singularity of the artistic piece. But in *Clueless*, when Elton says he has kept Tai's picture because it was taken by Cher, the viewer might suspect a parodic commentary on the misunderstandings in Austen's novel (which somehow begin with Emma's painting of Harriet). The film at this moment actually illustrates the historical and cultural gap between *Emma* and *Clueless*, whose title already alludes to a superficial world, where surfaces and style take precedence over content. The passage from Austen's novel is turned into a joke in Heckerling's film; after all, in an ordinary context (as the one in the film) a picture is much more important for what it contains (mainly when the theme is people/women) than by the fact of who has taken it (a fact that is made more evident when the viewer knows that Cher does not have any special ability for photography). Subverting this logic conclusion is a way the film finds to establish an inevitable difference in terms of Austen's world and ours—one in which, quoting Linda Hutcheon, in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, "the notion of the original as rare, single and valuable (in aesthetic or commercial terms) is called into question" (93).

The scene selected above from Heckerling's film also serves to illustrate the semantic features of ironic discourse proposed by Hutcheon in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*: relational, inclusive and differential. Not only does *Clueless* reproduce the ironies present in Austen's text, but in adapting them to our contemporary time, i.e., in re-describing them, the film ends up enlarging such an ironic discourse so as to encompass other issues not present in Austen's time. In watching *Clueless*, the viewer notices that many of its ironic effects are actually derived from the parodic relations the film creates with Austen's textual universe. Such relations, however, are not always explicitly shown—they merely allude to Austen. The lack of acknowledgment to Jane Austen's *Emma*, for instance, in the film credits, makes Austen be the *unsaid* in *Clueless*. In this sense, the relationship between said and unsaid meanings complement each other through this game of reference and allusion the adaptations create with Austen's source text, and also through the cultural gap between the literary and filmic texts.

Differently from the period pieces (McGrath's and Lawrence's *Emma*), which claim to be generally 'faithful' to Austen's source text, and which thus attempt to celebrate Austen's greatness and *reproduce* Austen's ironies, *Clueless* creates irony by intersecting past and present, by alluding to *Emma*, and at the same time by disguising, or denying, the allusion so as to concentrate on contemporary issues. Therefore, two readings of irony might result from *Clueless*: viewers who are not familiar with Austen's text will still enjoy the ironies in Heckerling's film; but the identification of *Emma* in *Clueless* (that is, the possibility of voicing out the unsaid) certainly adds to another level of irony in the film, one resulting from the dialogic rubbing of both texts. The scenes in *Clueless* which have a direct relation to Austen's *Emma* inevitably force the reader/viewer to re-dimension the question of irony in terms of new audiences, new targets and new interpreters.

The semantic categories of irony proposed by Hutcheon—relational, inclusive and differential—may also be enlarged, given another scope: not only do they work within the texts themselves, but in the texts' relations with one another. The irony with which Jane Austen depicted her world (in terms of appearance, manners and social ranks, for instance) is at once and the same time corroborated and further utilized as a pretext for launching an ironical look into our own time and culture. Therefore, some of the targets now are: the educational system, fashion, consumerism, and the superficiality characterizing young people's life in contemporary (American) world.

Discussion of other specific examples from the film are necessary for the elaboration of these points, mainly a consideration of the scenes that, though echoing passages in Austen's *Emma*, also enlarge their meaning by deviating from them, by making references to contemporary issues. Such is the case, for instance, of the ride home Elton offers Cher (this parallels the carriage-ride in *Emma*, when Mr. Elton confesses his love for the heroine). The dialogue goes on like this:

Cher: Oooh, you knew what?!

Elton: That you were totally sprung on me.

Cher: Hello?! Don't you mean Tai?

Elton: Tai?!

Cher: You have her picture in your locker.

Elton: I have the picture you took in my locker.

I have already commented on the ironic effects resulting from the substitution of painting for photography, a fact that already enlarges the question of dramatic irony present both in the corresponding passage in *Emma*, and in the attempt to reproduce it in *Clueless*. Actually, the fact that Elton keeps Tai's picture in his locker because it was Cher who took it does not sound plausible, or convincing, neither for Cher nor for the viewer—whose superior knowledge about *Clueless* as a remake of *Emma* denies, or clashes with, Elton's gesture to endow Cher with the rank of an 'author,' and the picture with the status of originality and authenticity. Furthermore, the sequence highlights the opposition between signs and content, an opposition that underlies the film.

However, not only the scene itself is important; its outcome also deserves further attention. The revelation to both Elton and Cher that they had been wrong in their conjectures—Elton is interested in Cher, not in Tai, as Cher herself supposed—makes both of them angry with each other to the extent that Cher asks Elton to stop the car for her to get out. The place where Cher is left is highly deserted, besides the fact that it is very late at night. When she is trying to get a taxi number she is alarmed by a robber who asks for her phone, her bag, and also for her to get down on the ground. Cher complains thus:

Cher: Oh, no. You don't understand, this is an Alaia.

Robber: An-awhat-a?

Cher: It's like a totally important designer.

Robber: And I will totally shoot you in the head. Get down!  
(Cher whimpers as she lies down on the pavement)  
Alright, um, count to a hundred. Thank you.

Cher: One, two...

Besides underlining the difference between a more secure and stable past world (though Diarmuid Lawrence's version of *Emma* already denies this supposed security and stability) and ours, which is mainly characterized by vulnerability and danger, this moment aligns with a general pattern of *Clueless* to highlight superficiality and surface, represented in this case through fashion, whose metonym, "an Alaia," indicates.<sup>4</sup> This aspect should be understood within a broader context of consumerism that the film also emphasizes and ironizes; in the dialogue above, the robber's echoic repetition of Cher's "totally" in "I will totally shoot you in the head" displaces the previous meaning attributed to it in Cher's sentence and generates the ironic and mocking intent.

Fashion and consumerism in *Clueless* walk hand in hand. The second song used at the film's beginning is entitled "Fashion Girl," by David Bowie, a fact that already introduces the relevance of the topic for the film's overall meaning. Consumerism is not only associated with fashion but with advertisements and technological development as well. Cher's voice-over, as the film opens, compares *Clueless* (or at least the scene that opens it, in which we are shown several shots of the girls having fun) to a "Noxema commercial." The film also plays with the conception of life in a highly technological and media-saturated society, in which, for instance, computers are used to provide for the combination of clothes, and polaroids replace mirrors when deciding for the right costume/clothes. The attention given to fashion and consumerism is such that the school where part of the action of *Clueless* takes place reminds the viewer, many times, of a fashion show walkway or parade. People are distinguished and identified also in

terms of their dressing. For example, Cher and Dionne take Tai home for what they call a make-over; Cher decides to change not only Tai's accent and vocabulary but her clothes as well. Her make-over is accompanied by the song "Supermodel," and according to Josh, Cher is acting out on the poor girl as if she were her Barbie doll. The film actually dramatizes some of these moments that show the importance of fashion for these people, by highlighting their artificiality and by calling attention to them through verbal tirades, music and slow motion.

To provide another example, when Christian appears for the first time in the film—he comes to Cher's classroom—his appearance is marked by the use of a slow motion shot, and the song "Summer of 42", by Michel Legrand. The slow motion, the very romantic song and the exchanging looks between Cher and Christian create an expectation of a romantic relation between them (an aspect that will not be fulfilled, as Christian is gay); the scene is thus ironically loaded and plays with the representation of romantic clichés. But more than that, one soon notices that Christian's sophisticated clothes find an echo in both Dionne's and Cher's way of dressing. Later on, when Murray tells Cher that Christian is gay, and Cher feels disappointed, she says she will at least continue the relationship with Christian as "one of her favourite shopping partners." But before she knows the real reason why Christian has rejected her, she concludes, "I suppose it wasn't meant to be, I mean, he does dress better than I do. What would I bring to the relationship?" Cher's conclusion undermines the possibility of creating friendship relations as based on wholeness and truth: relations are functional and contingent, and wholeness is replaced by merely material and pragmatic needs.

Another interesting scene relates to a group of school boys shown walking up the school path. Here, the boys are seen first from their backs, then a close-up shows their baggy pants (which seem to fall as they walk), their shoes, their caps, and then we see them from the front. The scene is punctuated by the song "All the Young Dudes" and by Cher's voice-over saying:

So, OK, I don't want to be a traitor to my generation and all, but I don't get how guys dress today. I mean, c'mon, it looks like they just fell out of bed and put on some baggy pants, and take their greasy hair, Ew! And cover it up with a backwards cap and like, we're expected to swoon? I don't think so!

The irony provided by this example results from the dramatization of the boys' walking in juxtaposition to Cher's look and the camera's slow motion device, as if they were on a fashion show walkway. What Cher says through voice-over, however, denies the meaning attributed to the scene in visual terms; that is, the role of 'models' that the image confers to the boys is not legitimised by Cher's comment. But since the viewer has access to the film's metalanguage as a whole, the irony here is also enriched by the viewer's awareness that Cher is being ironized throughout the film, exactly because of her obsession with fashion and consumerism. In one of her many voice-over examples, she says, "I felt impotent and out of control, which I really hate. I needed to find sanctuary in a place where I could gather my thoughts and regain my strength." In the next scene Cher is shown at the mall. In several other instances throughout the film, other characters corroborate Cher's obsession with shopping, and define her in terms of consumer parameters, by saying sentences like, "Just go back to the mall or something;" "go out and have fun, go shopping." In a scene almost at the end of the film, when Cher feels stifled, and highly disappointed with Tai, she decides to walk the streets—the scene will culminate in her self-discovery that she is in love with Josh; the scene is punctuated by the song "All by myself" and Cher's monologue through voice-over:

Everything I think and everything I do is wrong. I was wrong about Elton, I was wrong about Christian, and now Josh hated me. It all boiled down to one inevitable conclusion, I was just totally clueless. Oh, and this Josh and Tai thing was wiggling me more than anything. I mean, what was my problem? Tai

is my pal, I don't begrudge her a boyfriend, I really... Ooh, I wonder if they have that in my size.

This is meant to be Cher's self-revelation moment, when she makes a kind of retrospect and balance of what her life has been like in recent times. But the seriousness of such an "epiphanic moment" is broken, or at least delayed and undermined by Cher's noticing a beautiful dress in a shop-window, and saying, "I wonder if they have that in my size." Visually, the "epiphany" is also mocked and ironized by a self-conscious exposing of its artificiality through the colourful fountain that 'suddenly' appears and lightens as Cher finally discovers she is in love with Josh.

The emphasis that *Clueless* gives to surface and style, to playfulness and ironic jokes is also perceptible in the scene when Tai, after being disappointed by Elton's interest not in herself but in Cher, decides to destroy the 'tokens' of their supposed love. Tai and Cher are in front of the fireplace, and Tai asks Cher, "Does this thing [the fireplace] work?" Cher picks up the remote control and switches on the fire. As the fireplace is lit, Tai can already burn Elton's souvenirs. This scene is actually also inspired in Austen's *Emma*, when Harriet also makes Emma witness her destruction of Mr. Elton's souvenirs, which Harriet herself has named *Most precious treasures*. In Austen's novel, this is how Harriet refers to her act:

(...)—No, let them be ever so happy together, it won't give me another moment's pang: and to convince you that I have been speaking the truth, I am now going to destroy—what I ought to have destroyed long ago—what I ought never to have kept—I know very well (blushing as she spoke).—However, now I will destroy it all—and it is my particular wish to do it in your presence, that you may see how rational I am grown. Cannot you guess what this parcel holds?" said she, with a conscious look. (216-7)

Several interesting ironies spring from the parallelism created between both scenes. First of all, the use of the remote control to switch the fireplace clearly voices out the difference and the gap between Austen's world and ours. The difference, I would argue, is not only technological, but moral and emotional as well. In Austen, the reader not only believes Harriet and her pang (though she denies it), but the misunderstanding provoked by Emma's wild imagination, i.e., her invention of a romantic attachment between Mr. Elton and Harriet is once more brought under discussion so that both Emma and Harriet have the chance to learn, to grow rationally (echoing Harriet herself) with its disastrous outcome. In Austen, the incident at first is meant to be didactic, but of course, the moment also serves to ironize Emma, who apparently seems to have learned a lesson. But immediately after Harriet has put an end to the "Elton plot" (a plot that Emma has fantasized), by burning all the souvenirs, the reader comes across the following, "And when," thought Emma, "will there be a beginning of Mr. Churchill?" (219).

The fact is that Emma has already begun to thread another love-story for Harriet—this time, with Frank Churchill. Clearly, this also suggests the crucial role of a husband in Austen's time, when the possibility of marrying, for women, means economic survival and social respect. Harriet does not have anything else to hope for. In *Clueless*, however, finding a partner for Tai does not have any of the weight that it does in *Emma*. It is Tai herself who, after burning all the *stuff* (the term that Tai herself uses; "stuff" also sets the gap in relation to Harriet's expression "most precious treasures"), asks Cher to help her get Josh. In this sense, Tai's apparent pain for Elton's "loss" sounds as artificial, or superficial, as the fireplace that needs the remote control to get started. Furthermore, we should remember that fireplaces have played a key role throughout the history of cinematic *mise-en-scène* to function as metonymic icons for love and passion. *Clueless* thus 'de-clicherizes' all that, since there is no passion or love for the fireplace to (metonymically) symbolize.

This emphasis on surfaces and styles at the expense of content is also characteristic of the way Cher introduces her house and her mother to the viewer:

Isn't my house classic? The columns date all the way back to 1972. Wasn't my mom a betty? She died when I was just a baby. A fluke accident during a routine liposuction. I don't remember her, but I like to pretend she still watches over me.

The discussion of setting in period-piece Austen adaptations generally leads to the conclusion that they attempt to recreate what they assume to be Austen's pre-Victorian England through minute details of costumes, landscapes, country houses, and what helps to construct the *mise-en-scène* in general, such as furniture, fabrics, paintings, china. Everything is carefully constructed so as to give the illusion of period authenticity. To recall Andrew Higson's argument in "The Heritage Film and British Cinema,"

Such films display a museum aesthetic: the particular visual style of the films is designed to showcase these various heritage attractions, to display them in all their supposed authenticity. (233)

Therefore, in dealing with adaptations of an author like Jane Austen, the visual richness and splendour end up competing with, and very often diluting, the ironic nuances at play in the source novels. That is why, for the viewer of *Clueless* who is also familiar with this context of "heritage cinema," the scene above, when Cher refers to her house as "classic" and the columns as dating all the way back to 1972, enlarges itself in terms of ironic implications. The irony, again, is not only created through the gap resulting from the architectural differences, characterizing early nineteenth-century England and twentieth-century seventies, but also through the fact that it is Cher who introduces her house to the viewer and exposes its "classic" features. Whereas in

period-piece adaptations much care is taken to hide the recreation of authenticity, to disguise the process of simulation, *Clueless* exposes its artificiality, by self-mocking itself, a self-mockery that ends up affecting the relation it keeps with other Austen adaptations, by investing it with an ironic look.

This self-mockery intent can be illustrated with other moments in the film: for instance, when Cher is anxious because Christian does not call her, as he has promised, the telephone is shown in a close-up and the camera is positioned from below so as to exploit the object in its vertical features. Light on the phone is used in a way that creates a sense of upward tilt. This moment is punctuated by the main theme of "2001: A Space Odyssey"—Richard Strauss's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"—another intertextual (though ironic) echo of Stanley Kubrick. The association of the musical theme with the close-up, that endows the phone with exaggerated proportions, ironically comments on the importance of a phone-call when a person is on the verge of starting an emotional relationship (ironically, though at this moment Cher refers to Christian as "brutally hot," she will eventually discover his homosexual preferences).

The irony in this sequence, of course, also depends on the viewer's recognition and identification of the scene accompanied by the theme in Kubrick's film, in "The Dawn of Man" sequence, in which an ape-man discovers a pile of bones and starts to manipulate them, thus awakening to their function as tools, or weapons. Eventually, one of the bones, shown in close-up, is thrown in the air, and both its slow motion movement as well as the use of Strauss's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" endow the shot with a symbolic meaning of discovery and acquisition of knowledge, characteristic of an evolutionary moment; here, the piece of music, in its grandiosity, underscores the discovery, which sounds like an epiphany, a revelation, also considered from the viewer's perspective. The fact that the same piece of music is used in a different context in *Clueless*, at a time when we are so far away from (what seems now as) such 'rudimentary' discoveries, at a time when the world is so saturated with technological inventions (such as mobile phones,

computers, and polaroids that substitute mirrors when one is dressing) provokes a displacement of meaning that culminates in irony.

Though it is the use of Strauss's piece of music that creates a parallel—an ironic parallel—between the bone and the telephone, the parallelism can be extended to the monolith. That is, the telephone has the same shape (rectangular) and the same colour (black) as that of the monolith in *2001*. As the monolith, which is at times shot from below, this is how we are rendered the phone—which underlines its rectangular shape and verticality. As we all know, the monolith in Kubrick's film symbolically stands for mystery, and cosmic, existential, perhaps transcendental, significance. In *Clueless*, the "phone-monolith" is certainly devoid of such mysterious and self-revelatory weight, being only an object with a very tangible function. The density of significance that the music possesses in "A Space Odyssey," mainly because of its association with the existential overtones of the visual counterpart, is again undermined, undercut by the artificial and self-mocking tone of *Clueless*.

Obviously, *Clueless* is not a unique example of this kind of 'radical' adaptation and its significance. Some updatings of Shakespeare (as Lurhman's *Romeo and Juliet*) and the remake of *Dangerous Liaisons*, under the title *Cruel Intentions*, would also serve as illustrations. Considering Austen films, Whit Stillman's 1989 *Metropolitan*—based on *Mansfield Park*—also constitutes another example; this film's 'radical' adaptation of Austen, transposed to contemporary New York, having youthful playboys and playgirls, as well as its date of release (before the Austen revival in the 1990s), might have determined, or at least contributed to, its lack of visibility and critical reception.

These radical adaptations usually reveal a common trace of postmodern irony: its knowingness and self-referentiality. The discussion of *Clueless* above shows that Heckerling's film is constructed upon two movements: the simultaneous inscribing and undermining, through irony, of Austen's text. The examples selected for discussion—the intertextual relations with Shakespeare and with films by Stanley Kubrick (*Spartacus* and *2001*); the photography scene; the scenes

dealing with consumerism and fashion; the scene in which Cher uses the remote control to light the fireplace; the scene when she exposes her house to the viewer; the scene showing her 'epiphanic' moment almost at the end—all these are characterized by this ironic knowingness and self-referentiality; that is, differently from realist narratives, whose power depends on reference, *Clueless* exposes its artificiality and points to its own construction.

*Clueless* might be defined as a parody of Austen's *Emma* and of its period-piece adaptations. Although postmodernism is widely associated with Fredric Jameson's notion of pastiche, and my reading inserts *Clueless* in a post-modern context, I would not connect it to Jameson's concept, defined in the following terms:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor: pastiche is to parody what that curious thing, the modern practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the stable and comic ironies of, say, the 18<sup>th</sup> century ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 114).

*Clueless* imitates Austen through 'the wearing of a stylistic mask'—the ironist's vocabulary of redescription. It does possess parody's sense of humour and ulterior motives—the satirical impulse, laughter, and 'the latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.' *Clueless* illustrates Linda Hutcheon's definition of the parodic text as a form of ironic representation that is doubly coded in political terms:

Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the idea of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions. (“Theorizing the Postmodern,” 11).

Therefore, *Clueless* (though inserted in a postmodern context) would be less connected to Jameson’s concept of pastiche than to Hutcheon’s definition of parody. The double construction of *Clueless* as a film which simultaneously incorporates and criticizes elements from Austen’s world, i.e., its redescription of *Emma*, is responsible for generating not only great humour and laughter (absent in the notion of pastiche) but also for endowing the film with an ironic intent. Such an ironic intent has a crucial role in the notion of ‘discursive communities’—as related to *Clueless*—and consequently the two different targets the film addresses: both the sophisticated reader of Jane Austen, and the fashion-bound superficial futile youth of today. Both targets become ‘alazons,’ thus victims of such a ‘double irony,’ though for different purposes: one for knowing Austen, the other for not knowing her, in such a way that no one escapes irony.

In *Clueless*, irony results from a process of *re-description* (in Rorty’s sense of the term) of Austen’s ironic vocabulary, as well as from the intersection created between two worlds: pre-Victorian England, which is basically alluded by Heckerling’s use of certain characters and episodes from *Emma*, and contemporary high American society. Relations of power deriving from the narrator/viewer knowing more than the characters in the film also occur in *Clueless*, but the sense of superiority, authority and power (held by both narrator and viewer) is diluted because the viewer here also feels like a target/victim of that ironic discourse. Although the other two adaptations of *Emma*, the one by McGrath and the other by Lawrence, also create irony in different ways from Austen, it is in *Clueless* that this difference is most clearly perceptible. The examples chosen for discussion in *Clueless* are all

symptomatic of a world that is too much familiar to us, twentieth-century viewers of the film. The fact that Austen's readers, or even viewers of more faithful versions of *Emma* are able to interpret such scenes in their intersection and dialogue with the world of Austen's novel only favours the enlargement of these issues, by stretching irony's boundaries and contexts.

## Notes

1. This discussion constitutes a chapter section of my doctorate thesis entitled *From Page to Screen: A Study of Irony in Adaptations of Jane Austen's Emma*, taken at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, under the supervision of professors Anelise Reich Corseuil (adviser, UFSC) and John Caughie (co-adviser, University of Glasgow).
2. The quotations of Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* are taken from the script provided at: <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/5342/Clueless.htm>. Copied from the above site on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1999.
3. In *Clueless* "Elton" is a first name, and together with "Cher" and "Dionne" allude to names of artists; Cher says through voice-over that "Dionne and I were both named after great singers of the past who now do infomercials."
4. Other famous designers that Cher refers to in *Clueless* are Calvin Klein and Fred Segal.

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## **Filmography**

*Clueless*. Dir. Amy Heckerling. Perf. Alicia Silverstone, Paul Rudd, Brittany Murphy, and Justin Walker. Videocassette. Paramount, 1995.

*Cruel Intentions. Segundas Intenções*. Dir. Roger Kumble. Perf. Sarah Michelle and Ryan Phillippe. Videocassette. Columbia, 1999.

*Emma*. Dir. Douglas McGrath. Perf. Gwyneth Paltrow, Toni Colette, Alan Cumming, and Ewan McGregor. Videocassette. Miramax, 1996.

*Emma*. Dir. Diarmuid Lawrence. Perf. Kate Beckinsale, Mark Strong, Samantha Morton, and Raymond Coulthard. Videocassette. Meridian, ITV & A& E, 1996.

Jane Austen's Emma has been adapted many times throughout the years, most recently with Emma (2020). Here's how the movie versions compare. Here's every movie adaptation of Jane Austen's novel Emma, ranked from worst to best. Every few years Hollywood dives back into the bodiced world of Regency England to resuscitate one of Jane Austen's spunky, whimsical heroines - this year's lavish restoration goes to Autumn de Wilde's version, Emma (2020), starring Anya Taylor-Joy as the captivating conductress of romantic ruination. Jane Austen novels, for me, are not characterized by the plots, because frankly, at the end of the day I don't care who marries who and since it's Jane Austen we know everyone will wind up happy, even the assholes. Nor the antagonisms, since the most "villainous" behavior to be seen in an Austen novel is unpleasantness (though granted, the occasional cad willing to "ruin" a nice girl is pretty serious bad news in this milieu). But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding. Where Miss Taylor failed to stimulate, I may safely affirm that Harriet Smith will do nothing. You never could persuade her to read half so much as you wished. Jane Austen's novel 'Emma' and Amy Heckerling's Clueless, as significant and satirical reflections of Regency England and postmodern America respectively, indicate how the transformation process can shape and improve literacy, intertextual and logical importance. The transformation is evident in the compositions Jane Austen's Emma and Amy Heckerling's Clueless enabling us to investigate the assortment of logical subjects. How does the composer of Clueless use film techniques to transform the social, historical and environmental context of Jane Austen's Emma to the modern context of Clueless? Amy Heckerling's Clueless involves a storyline, which closely follows the text of Jane Austen's novel Emma.