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MADDALENA PENNACCHIA

RECREATING JANE: “AUSTENLAND” AND THE REGENCY THEME PARK

Twenty years have passed since the first broadcasting, in the autumn of 1995, of the BBC miniseries *Pride and Prejudice*, adapted for the screen by Andrew Davies (script) and Simon Langton (direction). Starring Colin Firth, who soon became an object of desire for thousands of women viewers, the miniseries paved the way for a craze for all things Austen. The phenomenon was renamed *Austenmania*, and brought about a number of screen adaptations of Austen's books, that in turn generated a multitude of further appropriations and rewritings (sequels, prequels, fan-fictions and spin offs) for both printed page and screens (cinema, TV, computer). Even though the high tide of Austenmania has by now passed, there is no doubt that Austenian textuality has expanded enormously in the last twenty years; so much so that Jane Austen's six novels, together with her letters and unfinished works, have become the palimpsest of a large fictional world spreading through a net of interconnected media platforms, and inhabited

by characters changing and transforming over time and whenever they cross media boundaries.

The Austen-on-film industry, which was revitalized by Ang Lee's innovative adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1995,¹ played a pivotal role in the creation of such a world: it reinvented Jane for the New Millennium, transforming her writing into audiovisual currency to be circulated in the creative economy that was launched at the end of the twentieth century.² It also played a part, however, in the process of transforming Austen into an easily recognizable and marketable brand of Englishness, a transformation that was allowed, if not endorsed, by Conservative as well as Labour cultural politics:

“Both Margaret Thatcher’s New Right governments of the 1980s and Tony Blair’s New Labour government of the late 1990s sought to establish the UK as a forward looking, enterprising nation, without wanting to discard altogether established traditions, images and identities. Both recognized that the UK was an old country but both, in Blair’s terms, wanted to rebrand it as young and vibrant.”³

In the context of Blair’s plan to re-shape Britain’s image abroad by rejuvenating it, the British creative industries continued to exploit traditional images of green pastures, magnificent manor houses and civilized manners, though with a critical twist. From Thatcher to Blair, and despite a fiery critical debate on the ‘correct’ representation of Britain, the

¹ See Ang Lee, *Sense and Sensibility*, Columbia Pictures Corporation – Mirage, USA – UK, 1995.

² It may be worth remembering, in this respect, that in the aftermath of his appointment as Prime Minister, in 1997, Tony Blair turned Thatcher’s Department of National Heritage into a Department of Culture, Media and Sport, championing at the same time the organization of a Creative Industries Task Force; the latter was tasked with drawing a list of activities linked to the national creative industries with the purpose of calculating the effect these industries had on the domestic economy, and of planning their further development. See T. Flew, *Creative Industries: Culture and Policies*, London, SAGE, 2012.

³ A. Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema. Costume Drama since 1980*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 49.

heritage industry and the film industry continued to thrive by drawing on each other. Evidence of this alliance can be found in the 1998 British Tourist Authority *Movie Map* of the UK, an innovative promotional tool that acknowledged the phenomenon of film-induced tourism and the influence of film on destination image. On the map, the locations of costume dramas – films set in the past and usually shot at properties belonging to the National Trust – regularly appeared, together with the locations of movies set in the present and more openly following the cultural trend of Cool Britannia. As far as costume drama as genre is concerned, therefore, the map further supports the marketing of the English countryside as the perfect travel destination for consumers of Austen's life and novels and their film adaptations.⁴

The fact that Austen fans or Janeites can travel almost anywhere to follow in the steps of 'authentic' or 'adapted' Jane and thus enjoy a "mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty"⁵ is a truth easily verifiable online. The Wayfarers, for instance, a well-established walking tour company founded in 1984, offers a walking tour of *Jane Austen's Country* that will take customers "to many of [Austen's] haunts, including the village of Steventon where her father was Rector, and the gentle rolling countryside that forms the backdrop to much of her work";⁶ while the Brit Movie Tours website still gives the possibility to book a

⁴ See M. Pennacchia, *Adaptation-induced Tourism for Consumers of Literature on Screen: the Experience of Jane Austen Fans*, in "Almatourism. Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development", Special Issue Film-induced Tourism, 6, 4, 2015, pp. 261-268.

⁵ L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York and Abingdon-Oxon, Routledge, 2006, p. 114.

⁶ *Jane Austen Country. Insiders' guide to Jane's family life*, web address www.thewayfarers.com/jane-austen.

BBC *Pride and Prejudice* four-day Tour of Locations.⁷ If these are among the classic Austen packages on the market, new and more creative proposals for Janeites are beginning to appear online, such as the *Jane Austen Weekends*, held since 2013 at the Governor's House in Hyde Park, Vermont, which are described on the website as

“ [...] a literary retreat that will slip you quietly back into Regency England in a beautiful old mansion where Jane herself would feel at home. [...] Just imagine the interesting conversation with a whole houseful of Jane's readers under one roof. Weekend guests have commented that they wish there had been a tape recorder under the dinner table so they could replay the evening again and again. It won't just be good company; it will be the 'company of clever well-informed people who have a great deal of conversation'. It will be the best! It's not Bath, but it *is* Hyde Park and you'll love Vermont circa 1800.”⁸

The quotation from *Persuasion* is perfect for the ideal buyer of this packet.⁹ Of course, Vermont is definitely not England, but what difference does it make for the experience of the passionate Austen fan? Is the time spent in this kind of Regency theme park or on a film set less valuable than the time spent in the authentic sites of Austen's life? Does authenticity lie in the place or in the experience the visitor is enjoying? Is the need to participate bodily in Austen's world merely the last frontier of consumerism or does it have something to do with the ultimate meaning of art and literature and the way it can transform our lives?

These are not easy questions to answer, but *Austenland*, a novel written by the American writer Shannon Hale, may help us reflect on such issues because it deals precisely with the psychology and behaviour of an

⁷ See *Pride and Prejudice Tour of Locations – 4 days*, web address www.britmovietours.com/?s=pride+and+prejudice&x=7&y=14.

⁸ *Jane Austen Weekends*, web address www.onehundredmain.com/events/jane-austen-weekends/.

⁹ J. Austen, *Persuasion*, edited by J. Todd and A. Blank, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 162 (II, 4).

Austen fan.¹⁰ The book was published in 2007 and soon enjoyed such a considerable success in the world of Austen fandom that it was followed by a sequel in 2012, *Midnight in Austenland*, and then adapted for the big screen in 2013 by the author herself (screenplay) and Jerusha Hess as film director.¹¹ Presenting itself as a chick-lit rewriting of *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel tells the life and adventures of a “thirty-something” New Yorker single who works as a graphic designer at a magazine:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a thirty-something woman in possession of a satisfying career and fabulous hairdo must be in want of very little, and Jane Hayes, pretty enough and clever enough, was certainly thought to have little to distress her.”¹²

The economic independence of the adapted heroine – that puts her in a completely different social position with respect to Austen’s original heroine – is ironically downplayed as soon as it is inserted into the revised quotation of the famous opening of *Pride and Prejudice*; the narrator focuses instead on Jane’s disappointing love life, which has been fashioned by Austen’s sentimental education and, consequently, seems to be ruled by a repeatedly frustrated need to find the perfect, lifelong relationship:

“At a very young age, she had learned how to love from Austen. And according to her immature understanding at the time, in Austen’s world there was no such thing as

¹⁰ Interestingly, the term *Austenland* was first used in 2004 within the context of interarts studies: “a vast, virtual territory in a state of continuous expansion and reconfiguration. Its constantly refined terrain is composed of the picturesque, views and prospects, drawings and sketches, portraits and ‘likenesses’ accumulated by readers and critics in their explorations of Jane Austen and her works” (B. Battaglia and D. Saglia, *Introduction: Picturesque Maps of Austenland*, in *Re-Drawing Austen. Picturesque Travels in Austenland*, edited by B. Battaglia and D. Saglia, Napoli, Liguori, 2004, p. 1).

¹¹ See J. Hess, *Austenland*, Fickle Fish Films – Moxie Pictures, UK – USA, 2013.

¹² S. Hale, *Austenland*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2007, p. 1.

a fling. Every romance was intended to lead to marriage, every flirtation just a means to find that partner to cling to forever.”¹³

As the narrator makes clear from the beginning, the point is that ever since the screen adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen’s intelligent and ironic writing, showing with meticulous wit her characters’ virtues and faults, has been turned into a visually entrancing world, peopled by perfectly handsome Mr Darcies. It has become a romance utopia to which women like Jane wish to escape whenever their daily life feels too dull:

“Jane had first read *Pride and Prejudice* when she was sixteen, read it a dozen times since, and read the other Austen novels at least twice [...] but it wasn’t until the BBC put a face on the story that those gentlemen in tight breeches had stepped out of her reader’s imagination and into her nonfiction hopes. Stripped of Austen’s funny, insightful, biting narrator, the movie became a pure romance.”¹⁴

We are told that Jane watches the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* over and over again on DVD and that she does it secretly, because she feels guilty and embarrassed about her addiction to the physical sensations the film adaptation is capable of arousing. At the same time, like all true addicts, she cannot get rid of the need and is hungry for more. To ask for more is, on the other hand, what all fans do and, to be sure, the market is ready to give them what they are looking for. This is all the more true in the so-called age of “convergence”, a phenomenon that stems from three factors:

“ [...] the flow of contents across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experience they want.”¹⁵

¹³ Ibidem, p. 18.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 2.

¹⁵ H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2006, p. 2.

Interestingly enough, the turning point of Hale's novel happens precisely when an eccentric old aunt of Jane's leaves her a strange gift in her will: a non refundable three-week vacation at Pembroke Park, an exclusive English country resort in Kent where "the Prince Regent still rules a carefree England",¹⁶ as the advertisement leaflet recites. Jane decides to take her once-in-a-lifetime chance and go to Austenland, "the Area 51 of vacation resorts",¹⁷ because she thinks she will be cured of her excessive Austenian fantasies by living them to the full, thus being purged of them in a sort of Aristotelian catharsis.

In the novel, therefore, Jane is represented as passing from reading, to viewing, and then participating in the text through a growing involvement of her own body. Reading, viewing and participating, these are the three modes through which stories can be narrated and engaged with in contemporary culture. In the "telling mode", that of literature, "our engagement [with a story] begins in the realm of imagination, which is simultaneously controlled by the selected, directing words of the text, and liberated"; in the "showing mode", as in film adaptations, "we are caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story [...] from the imagination to the realm of direct perception – with its mix of both detail and broad focus";¹⁸ in the third mode, the participatory one, we become agents and engage with a story in an interactive way: we may rewrite it, for example as in fan fiction, or we may plunge into it either through a few of our senses, as in videogames, or with our whole body, as in theme parks, "where we can walk right into the world of a Disney film, and virtual reality experience,

¹⁶ S. Hale, *Austenland*, cit., p. 13.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p.15.

¹⁸ L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, cit., p. 23.

where our own bodies are made to feel as if they are entering an adapted heterocosm”.¹⁹

Austenland may rightly be considered a kind of “adapted heterocosm”, but it is certainly more than a simple heritage theme park, or a Disneyfied version of the Regency era. If in theme parks people can enjoy a safe amusement ride through a fictional land, with no actual danger or consequences for their lives, in Pembroke Park certain risks are taken. In order to enter Austenland Jane has to sign a confidential agreement with Mrs Wattlesbrook, the owner and mistress of the place, where she accepts to be given a new name, Miss Earstwhile, dress up in Regency clothes (starting with corsets and drawers), and behave according to the social conventions of the time, minutely listed in the booklet that comes with the vacation packet. This will be the only way to engage bodily with an Austenian storyline, as Mrs Wattlesbrook explains to her guest:

“It is imperative that these social customs be followed to the letter. For the sake of all our guests, any person who flagrantly disobeys these rules will be asked to leave. Complete immersion in the Regency period is the only way to truly experience Austen’s England.”²⁰

There are “no scripts. No written endings”, at Pembroke Park and “an unexpected meeting with a certain gentleman”²¹ (also included in the packet), will be tailored to the customer’s needs; moreover, there will be a grand finale, a ball, where anything may happen. In this respect, Mrs Wattlesbrook’s agreement very much resembles the contract between writer and reader in the popular genre of romance. *Pride and Prejudice* is

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 51.

²⁰ S. Hale, *Austenland*, cit., p. 22.

²¹ Ibidem, p.13.

“generally considered the foundation text of modern romance”,²² the Ur-text of Harlequin or Mills and Boons’ novels, where the reader is sure to find the same plot over and over again: girl meets boy, the couple overcomes an obstacle, they live happily ever after. If Mrs Wattelsbrook agrees to offer Austenland’s visitors the realization of their romantic fantasies, however, there must be, on the customer’s side, an obligation to collaborate willingly with the process, by accepting the idea of suspending “disbelief” and playing a role in the fairy tale:

“A ball – things happen at a ball. Cinderella happened at a ball, Jane might happen. She felt hopelessly and wonderfully fanciful. The sun on her face, the bonnet ribbon under her chin, a wrap around her arms, and a hatted-and sideburned-man at her side, all lent to perfect suspension of disbelief.”²³

What Jane actually agrees to when she signs the confidential contract is to perform a role in the plot outline that Mrs Wattelsbrook has contrived for her guests; in other words, she agrees to be part of the show and interact with professional actors. Interestingly, among the genuine Regency amusements that are offered at Pembroke Park (croquet, sewing, playing cards, walking in the park and, of course, the final ball) home theatricals are also included, thus allowing Pembroke visitors to enjoy further their immersive experience using a love play-text to give voice to their own desires. It is Colonel Andrews, one of the theme park characters, who cheers up the small group of ladies bored by the relentless rain by saying:

“I’ve brought the very thing from London, a script from some little play or other called *Home by the Sea*. There are six parts, three pairs of lovers, just right for us, and it

²² M. Wherry, *More than a Love Story: the Complexity Of the Popular Romance*, in *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Popular Fiction*, Edited by C. Berberich, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academics, 2014, p. 56.

²³ S. Hale, *Austenland*, cit., p. 130.

will give us something to pass the time before the ball, so let's rehearse and put it on for Lady Templeton."²⁴

Even though "it's hardly Shakespeare",²⁵ as Jane puts it, the tried and true device of the play-within-the play still has the power to bring forth metafictional speculations on the nature of performance and authenticity, or more specifically on the distinction (or confusion) between "genuine emotion and the impersonation of feeling",²⁶ an issue that, if it is at the core of *Mansfield Park*, it is also highlighted in Hale's novel, when, for example, Jane and Mr Nobley, the Austenland's version of Mr Darcy, happen to see Lady Amelia, one of the visitors, and Captain East, together in the garden:

"Captain East and Amelia were silhouetted by starlight. They stood in front of a bench, and he was holding both her hands.

'Are they acting?' asked Jane, 'I mean, rehearsing for the theatricals?'

'They do not appear to be speaking at the moment'

He was right. They were completely occupied with staring into each other's eyes. [...] If they were acting, they were doing a mighty fine job.

'You think it's real...' said Jane.

'It is not right to watch.'"²⁷

Mr Nobley, who is an actor in real life and whose job is to play a part at Pembroke Park, paradoxically behaves like Edmund in *Mansfield Park*, censoring theatre for its dangers and opposing the idea of staging the play. An actor, however, might have a better understanding of the power of theatre on human beings and how the experience not only of watching but acting in a play might affect people. In this context, it is absolutely appropriate that Mr Nobley earnestly declares his love to the heroine on

²⁴ Ibidem, p.128.

²⁵ Ibidem, p.138.

²⁶ D. Marshall, *True Acting and the Language of Real Feeling: "Mansfield Park"*, in "Yale Journal of Criticism", 3, 1989, p. 88.

²⁷ See S. Hale, *Austenland*, cit., p. 140.

stage, in the course of *Home by the Sea*, when the audience and fellow performers think he is just acting. Only Jane and Mrs Wattlesbrook notice, on and off stage respectively, that he has slightly changed his lines, but Jane can only tantalizingly wonder if, in doing so, he has let his true self appear for a moment. After all, she thinks: “movie actors fall in love with each other on the set all the time. Is it so outlandish to suppose it might happen to me?”²⁸

Since Jane is not simply watching a show, but is taking part in one, she also contributes to its creation, even subverting the plot Mrs Wattlesbrook had organized for her with a final *coup de théâtre*. By experiencing this immersive form of tourism and leisure activity, Jane therefore changes the social environment around her, while also being changed by it beyond Mrs Wattlesbrook’s control. Unexpectedly for Jane, but necessarily for the genre, her holiday turns out to be exactly what the advertisement promised: a life-changing experience. From this point of view, Hale’s novel is extremely thought provoking, because it reveals what contemporary customers of the leisure and tourism industry more or less openly desire and what the market is trying to offer:

“Consumers are increasingly striving for experiences. As products and services have become interchangeable and replicated, the search for unique, compelling and memorable experiences in the context of tourism has become a key notion. In tourism marketing, the concept of the experience economy has long provided a valuable vehicle to design, stage and deliver experiences to consumers and gain competitive advantage [...] The concept of the experience economy has evolved, as consumers have become more active and empowered in playing a part in co-creating their own experience in quest for personal growth.”²⁹

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 135.

²⁹ B. Neuhofer and D. Buhalis, *Experience, Co-creation and Technology: Issues, Challenges and Trends for Technology Enhanced Tourism Experiences*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Tourism Marketing*, Edited by S. McCabe, Abingdon, Routledge, 2013, p. 124.

However fake the Regency England of *Austenland* may appear, the odd recreational activity the heroine experiences on her visit truly helps her to re-create herself, that is, to become more aware of her needs and desires and so refashion her life accordingly. The last pages of the novel may be read in this perspective. While Jane is waiting to take off, Mr Nobley breathlessly rushes into the aircraft cabin, sits next to her and introduces himself with his real name, saying that notwithstanding his fear of flying he is ready to follow her anywhere if she accepts his proposal to be near her for a time:

“‘So,’ he said, ‘is New York City our final destination?’

‘That’s home.’

‘Good. There’s bound to be work for an attractive British actor, wouldn’t you think?’

‘There are thousands of restaurants, and those waiter jobs have high turnover.’

‘Right’

‘Loads of theatres, too. I think you’d be wonderful in a comedy.’”³⁰

If at the beginning of the novel the economic independence of the heroine is clearly downplayed, things change at the end: the fact that Jane has got a well-paid job in New York while her Mr Darcy will have to start his career from scratch in the Big Apple represents a considerable change in the Austen marriage plot in terms of new power relations between genders; it is a refreshing plunge into the variety of real life situations. In conclusion, if we refrain from dismissing *Austenland* as a simply escapist fairy-tale, we will unexpectedly find that it is also an instructive story of female personal growth and even empowerment.

³⁰ S. Hale, *Austenland*, cit., pp. 190-191.

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