
The 1995 televised adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, a BBC miniseries directed by Simon Langton, contains one of the most famous shots in the history of British television: emerging from a lake, Mr Darcy (Colin Firth) strides through the verdant, sloping terrain of his countryside estate, jacket draped over one arm, in his right hand the potentially phallic symbol of a riding whip, all the while clad in *the* white shirt. This single item of clothing is so iconic within popular culture that it was recently purchased at a charity auction for an astonishing £25,000, a figure which made national headlines (Nanji, van Bruggen, and Taylor 2024). Believed by many to epitomise the female gaze, the renowned ‘lake scene’ foregrounds what is a central theme within Langton’s series: the relationship between perspective and desire. In Austen’s novel, the gaze is also a prominent motif. Unlike Langton, Austen cannot explore the theme of perspective through having her audience look through the lens of a camera, since she is confined to the written word. Does the lack of a visual medium limit her ability to convey themes so much concerned with sight and viewpoints? Is the image of a translucent white shirt more successful in conveying narrative themes than a 120,000-word novel? The answer, in short, is no. Comparing the presentation of the gaze in the 1995 series and the 1813 novel reveals why the study of texts cannot be replaced by the consumption of visual media.

Reviewing Langton’s miniseries, *The New York Times* critiqued “there are perhaps too many languorous walks across meadows, and one or two ornately choreographed dances seem to go on forever.” (O’Connor 1996) Indeed, the adaptation does seem to be furnished with an excess of dazzling spectacles, all of which ensure the scopophilic gaze is satiated not only through eroticism, but also through aestheticism. Instantly gratified by sweeping landscapes of picturesque countryside, or elegant shots of glittering ballrooms and glossy whirls of petticoats and aigrettes, the viewer never has to delve beneath surface level in order to appreciate the extravaganza. This exemplifies the mindlessness with which visual media can be consumed and enjoyed. Readers of Austen’s novel cannot afford to be so complacent. Straying from the traditions of her Gothic and Romantic contemporaries, Austen refuses to enhance her scenes with elaborate descriptions of the material surroundings, adopting instead a minimalist style with terse and efficient explanations. Consequently, Austen’s characterisation is showcased not through elaborate descriptions of apparel and estates, but rather through dialogue, leaving the reader to make inferences about the characters from more subtle cues such as their register. Lack of inference can lead to misinterpretation. “I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading” (Austen 1972, 100) is a celebrated quote embossed across merchandise and £10 banknotes alike. Yet within the context of the novel, it is a deeply ironic line, utterly lacking in sincerity, delivered by Caroline Bingley in a brazen attempt to impress Mr Darcy. Caroline’s witicism is ostentatious rather than wise. Readers of Austen must keep vigilant watch, searching for irony and subtlety so as not to make misinterpretations and find themselves drinking tea from mugs embellished by the insincere words of Caroline Bingley. In a letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen specifies she has no interest in entertaining an audience incapable of reading between the lines, writing “I do not write for such dull Elves As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves.” (Austen 1952) Austen expects those who wish to enjoy her work to be analytical, or else the text’s brilliant nuance and wit will be lost. Meanwhile, for Langton’s audience, scopophilic pleasure promises that they do not need to analyse the work critically to enjoy it. Whereas the gaze in Austen’s novel is cerebral and grounded in inference, the gaze in the 1995 miniseries is materialistic and overt. In the words of Paula Marantz Cohen, “literature relies on words that can plumb depths and describe contexts... And romantic comedies engage with material things in a particular way: they glory in them and glorify them.” (Cohen 2010, 79) Arguably, those consuming *Pride and Prejudice* as a piece of visual media interact with its world in the same way that the character of Miss De Bourgh does. In the novel, Austen reveals that this sickly young woman must have her governess place “a screen in the proper direction before her eyes” (Austen 1972, 197) directing her gaze towards sights guaranteed to be pleasant and inoffensive, resembling how Langton’s audience are encouraged to stare listlessly at the aestheticised scenes, lazy gaze guided by the camera, not feeling the need to search for irony and polysemy. In fact, the
hints of satire which readers seek out is perhaps actively avoided by viewers of the miniseries, since such sardonic undertones might detract from the adaptation’s dreamy, romantic atmosphere. This hesitation to look upon what is unpleasant contrasts with the philosophy of Elizabeth Bennet, described as a “studier of character,” who sketches those around her with such frankness that her observations can be offensive to polite society. Visiting Netherfield, even the indecorous Mrs Bennet implores her daughter, who has begun to pass judgement on their host Mr Bingley, “remember where you are, and do not run on in the wild manner that you are suffered to do at home.” (Austen 1972, 88) Since Austen is lauded for her precise characterisation, it is certainly possible the author is projecting her own abilities onto her heroine, thereby identifying with her analytical outlook. The author herself, then, prefers a perceptive and penetrating gaze to an inoffensive, insipid one. That observation should be linked to inference and critical thinking is a crucial lesson taught by the 1813 text which the highly visual, extravagant style of the 1995 adaptation fails to convey.

Returning to the matter of Firth’s wet shirt, the miniseries’ erotic lake scene can certainly be interpreted as a paean to the female gaze. Lisa Hopkins writes that the visuals of the 1995 adaptation are “unashamed about appealing to women – and in particular about fetishizing and framing Darcy and offering him up to the female gaze.” (Hopkins 2001, 112) Similarly, Margarita Carretero González and María Elena Rodríguez Martín note that “the appeal of the leading male character play[ed] a decisive role” in the success of the miniseries (González and Rodríguez Martín 2006). But is the narrative of Pride and Prejudice really equipped for such a celebration of desire? In answering this question, one must consider the fate of Lydia Bennet, a young woman who is punished for acting on her sexual impulses and eloping with Wickham. Scathingly, Austen writes “little... permanent happiness could belong to a couple who were only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue,” (Austen 1972, 325) demonstrating that in the 1813 novel there exists a dichotomy between “passions” and “virtue”. Opposing morality, Lydia’s lascivious female gaze is presented by Austen as antagonistic, and Dennis W. Allen goes so far as to claim the entire narrative is “based on a fear of desire.” (Allen 1985, 437) The novel’s storyline concerning Lydia Bennet undergoes no alteration in the 1995 adaptation, and therefore what the narrative implies about feminine desire and its iniquity remains unchanged. The miniseries' jubilantly sensual shots become rather incongruous to the overarching, didactic plot, which promotes chastity. The juxtaposing nature of the narrative and cinematography makes it extremely difficult to ascertain any strong, persistent message about the lustful female gaze. There is confusion over whether carnality is a commodity to be indulged in, or a dreadful source of shame. Meanwhile, on this very topic Austen constructs a far more carefully considered argument. Not only does she insist that promiscuity opposes virtue, she also suggests that it conflicts with reason. This is reflected in Elizabeth’s rejection of Mr Collins, when after being accused of coquetry the beleaguered heroine beseeches “do not consider me an elegant female... but as a rational creature.” (Austen 1972, 150) Ventriloquising through Elizabeth, Austen implies through her use of adversative conjunction that a woman who coyly expresses her desires is not a “rational creature.” Arguably, this foreshadows how Elizabeth will come to realise that her flirtation and attraction towards Wickham has prompted her to act illogically, the otherwise rather acute “studier of character” having made a drastic error of judgement. Austen informs the reader that when Wickham presents himself to the charmed Elizabeth on their second meeting, the latter feels “that she ha[s] neither been seeing him before, nor thinking of him since, with the smallest degree of unreasonable admiration.” (Austen 1972, 119) Here, Austen conflates the semantics of sight with those of thought, emphasising that Elizabeth’s opinions of Wickham are grounded in his appearance, which is tantalisingly handsome. Utterly allured, the usually cynical and perceptive judge of character makes surface-level observations, and the consequences are disastrous. Austen presents desire and the gaze with antipathy, not just because she believes such things connote depravity, but also because they oppose reason and prevent women from acknowledging the defects of the ‘gentlemen’ they flirt with. In the world of Pride and Prejudice, the female gaze is blinding. Austen’s narrative can easily be interpreted as a warning to naive young women, instructing them to act logically rather than on desire alone. However, Langton’s gratuitous visuals of translucent white shirts deliberately titillate the audience, encouraging the very behaviours Austen hopes to curb through a narrative which
villainises the gaze and favours self-abnegation. The eroticism enabled by the 1995’s visual medium ultimately leads to a betrayal of the original novel’s message.

With its ornate shots fetishising both the material world of *Pride and Prejudice* and the brooding men who inhabit it, Langton’s miniseries revels in aestheticism and eroticism, principles which Austen rejects due to the fact that they hinder critical-thinking. Her novel is a testimony to the importance of such critical thinking, a message conveyed through the minimalist and nuanced style as well as the overall message pushed by the narrative, which teaches us not to be misled by attractive exteriors. The text implores us to look beyond what is visible, demonstrating the importance of studying the written word, despite our growing dependence on visual communication. If we fail to cultivate the critical, analytical skills which literature encourages us to adopt, how will our society be able to cope with this growing dependence on visual communication, a medium which, as *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates, can often be unreliable? For example, how will we be able to separate A.I. art from human art? How will we see through the misinformation propagated by the fake news stories which colourfully flash across our social media pages? In conclusion, taking the upwards trend of visual communication into account, I would argue that the study of texts is more important than ever.

Word Count: 1804

References


https://aedean.org/actas/30/15-FromaustenmaniaToFirthmania.pdf.

