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ÉCRANISATION AND NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATION IN JANE AUSTEN'S *NORTHANGER ABBEY*: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE 2007 ITV ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT:

This article critically examines the process of écranisation, the transformation of literature into film, through a comparative study of Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey (1817) and its 2007 ITV adaptation. Using Pamusuk Eneste's tripartite framework of addition, reduction and modification, the study analyses how the adaptation reshapes Austen's parody of gothic fiction into a visually expressive and emotionally immediate cinematic text. Close, chapter-by-chapter comparison reveals that reductions streamline social satire and secondary plots, additions externalise Catherine Morland's imaginative life through dream sequences, and modifications recalibrate characterisation and tone to intensify romance and gothic spectacle. While Austen's irony and subtle commentary are diminished, the adaptation achieves accessibility and affective resonance for contemporary audiences. The article argues that this transformation illustrates adaptation as an act of cultural negotiation, demonstrating how Austen's narratives remain adaptable to shifting aesthetic and cultural demands, and how écranisation provides a rigorous framework for understanding such processes.

Keywords: *Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, adaptation studies, écranisation, gothic parody*

INTRODUCTION:

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) occupies a distinctive position within her oeuvre as both a parody of the gothic novel and a satire on romantic idealisation. The novel's ironic narration and use of free indirect discourse enable readers to oscillate between Catherine

Morland's naive perceptions and the more grounded social reality of Regency England. In 2007, ITV produced a film adaptation directed by Jon Jones and scripted by Andrew Davies, compressing the novel into an eighty-four-minute feature. This adaptation translates Austen's layered prose into a visual and auditory register, relying on mise-en-scène, performance, sound and cinematography to replace the narrator's ironic commentary with emotional immediacy. The process of adaptation raises crucial questions regarding fidelity, cultural translation and interpretive transformation. This article applies Pamusuk Eneste's écranisation model to examine systematically how the adaptation reconfigures Austen's novel through the strategies of addition, reduction, and modification.

The central research questions are: What motivates the adaptation's departures from Austen's text? How do cinematic conventions reshape theme, characterisation and audience reception? And does the ITV version reinforce or dilute Austen's original parodic critique? By situating the analysis within adaptation theory, this article contributes to ongoing debates about the negotiation between literary fidelity and cinematic reinvention. The study argues that while the adaptation foregrounds romance and gothic spectacle over irony, it simultaneously demonstrates how Austen's narratives remain adaptable to shifting cultural expectations.

Literature Review

Critical responses to Austen's adaptations have long recognised the difficulties of translating her irony and narrative voice into visual media. As Cartmell and Whelehan observe, "the camera's gaze often lingers on moments of romantic possibility while neglecting the intricacies of social critique" (76). Such observations hold particular weight for *Northanger Abbey*, where parody and irony are integral to the novel's effect. Eneste's écranisation framework, originally articulated in the context of Indonesian literature and film, has since been applied internationally as a systematic means of mapping adaptive change (Eneste). By categorising additions, reductions and modifications, this framework enables precise comparative analysis between text and screen. Studies in adaptation theory by André Bazin, Thomas Leitch, Linda Hutcheon, and Deborah Cartmell further stress the dual imperatives of fidelity and innovation, emphasising that adaptations inevitably become cultural artefacts shaped by their own historical moments (Bazin 45; Leitch 92; Hutcheon 16).

Recent scholarship on Austen's screen tradition suggests recurring patterns: interior narration is externalised through visual metaphor and emotive performance; satirical subplots and minor arcs are truncated for narrative economy; and romance, alongside gothic imagery, is intensified for accessibility and affective immediacy (García 43; Rahmawati 128). These tendencies are particularly pronounced in the 2007 ITV *Northanger Abbey*, which deploys gothic dream sequences, emphasises romance between Catherine and Henry, and streamlines Austen's social critique.

Methodology and Framework

The study employs a comparative textual and visual methodology situated within adaptation studies. The primary sources consist of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), consulted in the Oxford World's Classics edition, and the 2007 ITV film adaptation directed by Jon Jones with a screenplay by Andrew Davies. The methodological design follows Pamusuk Eneste's model of écranisation, which remains a significant analytical tool for adaptation studies because of its capacity to classify the precise ways in which a text is reshaped in its cinematic re-imagining. Eneste distinguishes three fundamental processes of addition, reduction and modification; that together account for the main strategies by which narratives are translated across media (Eneste). By applying this tripartite framework, it becomes possible to map systematically the transformation of Austen's novel into its screen version and to evaluate how far these alterations respond to the imperatives of cinematic storytelling and the expectations of contemporary audiences.

The research process entailed a close, chapter-by-chapter comparative reading of the novel alongside the corresponding sequences in the film. Each narrative moment was coded according to whether it represented an addition, reduction or modification. These were then assessed not only in terms of their narrative function but also in relation to the cinematic techniques used to execute them. The methodological approach also considers theoretical perspectives from adaptation studies, such as André Bazin's conception of adaptations as new cultural artefacts, Thomas Leitch's assertion of adaptation as a gateway to the original text, and Linda Hutcheon's emphasis on adaptation as both repetition and creative reinterpretation (Bazin 45; Leitch 92; Hutcheon 16). By situating the film within its historical and cultural context, this research recognises adaptation as not merely a process of textual translation but also one of cultural negotiation. In this respect, Stuart Hall's model of negotiated reading and Wolfgang Iser's notion of textual gaps are particularly valuable, as both theories highlight the active role of audiences in shaping meaning. The ITV adaptation's use of visual spectacle, gothic motifs, and heightened romance invites viewers to construct meanings that are distinct from those generated by Austen's prose. The methodology thus combines formal analysis with interpretive theory, producing a multi-dimensional study of adaptation as a site of transformation.

Comparative Chapter-by-Chapter Analysis

The adaptation of *Northanger Abbey* demonstrates a deliberate strategy of compressing Austen's satirical textures while expanding the emotional immediacy of Catherine Morland's journey. The opening chapters of the novel, which establish Catherine's unremarkable childhood and slow emergence into reading culture, are largely reduced in the film. Austen devotes considerable narrative space to presenting Catherine as "in training for a heroine"

whose ordinary qualities and late fascination with literature mark her as an ironic foil to the gothic heroines she admires (Austen 5). In the film, this developmental irony is abridged into a visual shorthand: Catherine is introduced already captivated by gothic novels, and her fantasies are externalised through stylised dream sequences. The reduction of Catherine's childhood background not only accelerates narrative pacing but also shifts the viewer's interpretive stance, as the protagonist appears less as an ironic construction and more as a sympathetic figure caught between fantasy and reality. This reduction is accompanied by the significant addition of carriage fantasies and gothic imaginings, which render visually what Austen narrates with irony. By dramatising these fantasies, the adaptation appeals directly to a contemporary audience's visual literacy and expectations of romantic drama, even if it diminishes the parodic tone of the novel.

The middle sections of the novel, particularly Catherine's introduction to Bath society and her entanglement with Isabella Thorpe, undergo similar processes of reduction and modification. Austen's careful depiction of Bath as a microcosm of social climbing, etiquette, and satire is streamlined for narrative efficiency. The long conversations between Mrs Thorpe and Mrs Allen, filled with verbose self-promotion and satire of social pretensions, are excised in favour of brisker exchanges. In their place, Isabella's overt affection and calculated charm are foregrounded, creating a more immediate sense of her manipulative character. This constitutes both a reduction of Austen's satire and a modification of Isabella's presentation. Whereas Austen allows readers to perceive Isabella's duplicity gradually through irony and unreliable narration, the film positions her from the outset as transparent in her designs. The effect is to heighten dramatic tension and accelerate Catherine's moral awakening, although at the cost of Austen's nuanced social commentary. The depiction of Bath's public entertainments, particularly the balls, further illustrates the adaptation's strategy of condensing polyphonic social scenes into moments of romantic immediacy. In the novel, Catherine's feelings of awkwardness, excitement, and confusion unfold across extended descriptions and dialogues. Mrs Allen's comic asides and preoccupation with fashion serve to provide a satirical counterpoint to Catherine's emotional turmoil. In the adaptation, these elements are heavily abridged. Instead, Catherine's encounters with Henry Tilney are emphasised, with the muslin conversation expanded into a playful and intimate exchange that establishes Henry's charm in ways Austen only hints at. This modification recalibrates the balance of satire and romance, ensuring that the audience's focus remains on the central romantic plot rather than on the intricacies of Regency social critique.

As the narrative progresses to the gothic centrepiece at Northanger Abbey, the adaptation again demonstrates a preference for externalising Catherine's imagination. Austen's abbey is described as modern and relatively comfortable, serving as a satirical deflation of Catherine's expectations. By contrast, the film presents the abbey in dim lighting and ominous mise-en-

scène, with elongated corridors and looming architecture that evoke the gothic settings of Radcliffe's novels. This modification significantly alters the tone, replacing Austen's irony with cinematic suspense. Catherine's gothic fantasies, represented in the novel through narration, are translated into vivid dream sequences involving candlelit corridors and menacing figures. These additions, while enhancing the visual spectacle, reframe the novel's parody into something closer to genuine gothic drama. The effect on audience reception is substantial: Catherine is positioned less as a parody of the gothic heroine and more as a character whose fantasies, while misguided, resonate affectively with the visual mood of the film. Finally, the adaptation's treatment of General Tilney illustrates how modifications can reshape characterisation. Austen's General is largely depicted through social detail and irony, his ambition and cold calculation implied through Catherine's gradual recognition of his motives. In the film, however, he is rendered overtly menacing, his behaviour and presence underscored by ominous music and threatening mise-en-scène. This intensification shifts the adaptation away from subtle satire and towards gothic villainy, aligning with the film's broader emphasis on emotional immediacy. The climax of Catherine's ejection from the abbey is consequently more dramatic, resonating with modern expectations of confrontation and spectacle, though at the cost of Austen's irony and understatement.

Cinematic Techniques

The translation of *Northanger Abbey* into film necessarily entails the substitution of Austen's narrative voice with cinematic strategies that externalise thought, atmosphere and irony. Where the novel relies heavily on free indirect discourse and authorial commentary to mediate Catherine Morland's oscillation between fantasy and reality, the film adopts visual and auditory devices to make this psychological dynamic accessible to viewers. One of the most striking techniques is the use of fantasy sequences, in which Catherine's reading of Radcliffean gothic novels spills over into stylised daydreams. These sequences employ chiaroscuro lighting, exaggerated set designs, and rapid editing to evoke the heightened drama of Catherine's imagination. By visually dramatising what Austen presents as ironic overindulgence, the adaptation shifts tone from parody to spectacle, privileging the affective immediacy of gothic imagery over the subtler satirical mode of the novel.

Performance also plays a critical role in externalising the subtleties that Austen conveys through narration. Felicity Jones's portrayal of Catherine captures vulnerability and emotional openness through facial expression, physical gestures, and moments of silence, ensuring that viewers can read the protagonist's innocence and naivety without recourse to authorial commentary. Similarly, Henry Tilney, played by J. J. Feild, is reimagined through performance choices that emphasise warmth, humour, and romantic allure. His muslin conversation, expanded in the adaptation, benefits from nuanced delivery and comic timing, transforming what in Austen is a playful satire of social conventions into a moment of direct

romantic chemistry. These performance strategies underscore how screen adaptations must rely on actors to embody the interpretive layers that prose communicates through tone and narrative distance.

Sound and music also compensate for the absence of Austen's ironic voice. The film deploys a score that alternates between light, playful motifs for Catherine's encounters in Bath and darker, brooding compositions for her experiences at *Northanger Abbey*. The orchestral swell during Catherine and Henry's horseback ride in the rain is emblematic of how the soundtrack creates an atmosphere of heightened emotion, foregrounding romance in ways Austen would have left understated. By contrast, the ominous music accompanying General Tilney's appearances reframes him as a gothic villain rather than a satirical patriarch, steering audience interpretation toward fear and suspicion. Through these musical cues, the adaptation constructs a tonal palette that diverges from the novel's irony but succeeds in immersing audiences in emotional immediacy.

Mise-en-scène further reinforces the adaptation's interpretive stance. Bath is presented through wide, bright establishing shots of its crescents, assemblies, and ballrooms, aligning with audience expectations of period drama aesthetics. Costuming likewise conveys characterisation: Catherine's light-coloured gowns reflect her innocence and youth, while Isabella Thorpe's darker, more elaborate dresses signal her artifice and ambition. The abbey sequences, by contrast, adopt low lighting, long corridors, and foreboding architecture, creating a stark visual contrast to Bath and situating the climax in a gothicised environment that literalises Catherine's fantasies. This design choice modifies Austen's intention, which was to expose the mundanity of the abbey, yet it also aligns with the adaptation's broader aim of making Catherine's inner world visible to audiences. Cinematic techniques thus serve as both replacements and reinterpretations of Austen's narrative strategies, mediating between fidelity to the source and the necessities of screen storytelling.

Adaptation as Cultural Negotiation

The 2007 ITV adaptation of *Northanger Abbey* exemplifies the extent to which adaptation is less a matter of direct translation than of cultural negotiation. Eneste's model of écranisation allows us to trace, with precision, how additions, reductions and modifications work not in isolation but as part of a broader interpretive strategy shaped by the demands of television, the expectations of viewers, and the conventions of period drama. Reductions cluster in episodes where Austen dwells on social satire, minor characters, and leisurely descriptions, as these elements are incompatible with the compressed eighty-four-minute runtime and the need to maintain narrative momentum. Additions, particularly the gothic dream sequences, demonstrate how the adaptation externalises Catherine's imagination for an audience accustomed to visual spectacle, transforming what in Austen is parody into moments of

genuine gothic tension. Modifications, especially those affecting characterisation, reflect a cultural shift towards emotional immediacy and accessibility, as seen in the heightened menace of General Tilney or the intensified chemistry between Catherine and Henry. These adaptive strategies must be understood in light of the cultural moment of their production. The early twenty-first century witnessed a renewed appetite for period drama, with adaptations of Austen's works forming part of a wider media landscape that sought to balance heritage aesthetics with contemporary sensibilities. The 2007 *Northanger Abbey* aligns with this trend by foregrounding romance and gothic atmosphere while softening Austen's irony and social critique. Such choices can be seen as part of what Hutcheon describes as adaptation's double nature, repetition of a canonical text alongside difference shaped by new cultural and aesthetic imperatives (Hutcheon 16). In this respect, the film reflects both the enduring relevance of Austen's narratives and the necessity of reconfiguring them to resonate with twenty-first-century audiences. This negotiation is not without consequences. By minimising the satirical dimension of the novel, the adaptation risks flattening the complexity of Austen's critique of gothic reading practices and Regency social life. Yet it also succeeds in rendering Catherine Morland an accessible heroine for modern viewers, whose emotional sincerity and imaginative openness find visual and performative expression. The balance of loss and gain reflects Bazin's insight that adaptations become new cultural artefacts, shaped as much by their reception as by their fidelity to source (Bazin 45). Thus, the adaptation is best understood not as a deficient imitation of Austen's novel but as a re-creation that enables the text to circulate within new interpretive communities, reaffirming the vitality of Austen's legacy in contemporary media culture.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and its 2007 ITV adaptation demonstrates the value of écranisation theory as a framework for mapping the mechanics of adaptation. Reductions condense Austen's satire, additions visualise Catherine's fantasies, and modifications heighten romance and gothic spectacle. These strategies collectively confirm that adaptation is not a neutral transfer of content but a dynamic negotiation shaped by medium, audience, and cultural context. Although the adaptation sacrifices much of Austen's irony, it achieves emotional immediacy and accessibility, affirming Thomas Leitch's view of adaptation as a gateway to literature (92). By recasting Austen's parody into a visually rich narrative, the film succeeds in introducing *Northanger Abbey* to new audiences while simultaneously reflecting the cultural expectations of early twenty-first-century period drama. Ultimately, this case study underscores that adaptation must be evaluated less in terms of fidelity and more as a form of cultural dialogue, through which canonical texts are continually re-imagined and revitalised for evolving audiences.

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