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## *Adaptation as revision: Transforming makeover narratives from canonical literature to contemporary Hollywood teen film*

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# *Adaptation as revision: Transforming makeover narratives from canonical literature to contemporary Hollywood teen film*

Abstract:

The 1990s saw a rise in teen girl adaptations of canonical literary texts. This paper works with John Bryant's concept of adaptive revision to consider particular teen girl adaptations: *She's All That* (1999), an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1912), and *Clueless* (1995), from Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1815). It argues that in transforming literary narratives from page to screen in a third wave feminist context, teen film adaptations present makeover narratives that simultaneously empower and oppress teen girl figures.

Biographical note:

Paige Tucker completed a Master of Arts at La Trobe University in 2020. Her thesis explores how third wave feminism stylistically and thematically influenced teen film adaptations of canonical literature from the 1990s and 2010s. Her research interests include adaptation theory and the romantic comedy film genre.

Keywords:

Literary adaptation, teen films, the makeover, third wave feminism, *Clueless*, *She's All That*.

## Introduction

The 1990s and 2000s saw a proliferation of teen film adaptations of canonical texts (Davis, 2006). *Never Been Kissed* (Gosnell, 1999), *Cruel Intentions* (Kumble, 1999) and *Easy A* (Gluck, 2010), adapted from *As You Like It* (Shakespeare, 1623), *Les Liasons Dangereuses* (Laclos, 1782) and *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850), respectively, are just a few examples. The 1990s to 2010s were the decades of third wave feminism, which looked to empower women and girls, partly by arguing that femininity is empowering (Riordan, 2001). Many literary teen film adaptations of this period promote this concept (Colling, 2017), often by presenting glamorous makeover sequences as liberating. In contrast, their earlier literary sources often presented women as subject to strict social rules that were enforced and judged by the patriarchy. However, third wave feminism was also full of contradictions, with its promotion of femininity seen by some feminists as destabilising to female liberation, with makeup and fashion seen as a "nod to patriarchy" (Schuster, 2017, pp. 649-650). Certainly, many teen films uncritically present makeover sequences as a means of regulating female appearance and behaviour for male approval. In this article I will argue that, in transforming literary narratives from page to screen in a third wave feminist context, teen film adaptations present makeover narratives which simultaneously empower and oppress teen girl figures.

Screen adaptations can never be truly faithful to texts on which they are based. As Susan Hayward (2000, p. 6) argues, "adaptations are a synergy between the desire for sameness and reproduction on the one hand, and, on the other, the acknowledgement of difference". In other words, the very nature of adaptation is to change and reorder an old work to make something new. George Bluestone referred to the process of taking a literary text and presenting it on screen as "the mutational process", whereby "changes are *inevitable* the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium" (Bluestone, 1968, p. 5). Bluestone highlights that in changing from a linguistic to a visual medium, stylistic and thematic elements of the literary work will change, as the two media have different contingencies. Prominent contemporary adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon (2012) also contends that fidelity discourse, once the cornerstone of adaptation theory, is impractical for judging an adaptation, since "an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary" (p. 9). McFarlane takes it a step further, explicitly undercutting the suitability of fidelity discourse. He states that fidelity discourse "is a wholly inappropriate and unhelpful criterion for either understanding or judgment" of an adaptation, as "every reading of a literary text is a highly individual act of cognition and interpretation" (McFarlane, 2007, p. 15).

I will use John Bryant's concept of adaptive revision to frame my argument. Bryant's notion of adaptive revision bypasses traditional notions of fidelity in adaptation theory. It explores adaptation as a process of reimagination, whereby, "Adaptors are 'revising readers' who enact their interpretations, not through criticism, but by altering the material text itself through quotation, allusion and plagiarism" (Bryant, 2013, p. 50). Adaptive revision focuses on how "adaptors generate new versions of the text and thereby re-author the work, giving it new meaning in new contexts" (Bryant, 2013, p. 48).

## Makeovers

Literary teen film adaptations use cinematic codes and conventions to transform written, detailed descriptions of transformation into visual spectacles. Traditionally, teen film adaptations present makeovers in a much more positive light than their literary originals. This is because third wave feminism focussed heavily on the idea that femininity does not undermine female freedom. Girlie girls were a feminist subset who emerged in the 1990s, and who believed that "'femininity' is not opposed to feminism but is positioned as central to a politics of agency, confidence and resistance" (Munford, 2004, p. 148). Girlie girls tried to show that women can wear lipstick and the colour pink and still be empowered (Munford, 2004, p. 147).

Another reason for the makeover's change in tone from text to screen has to do with genre and its conventions. Many canonical literary texts fall into the drama or romance genres, and so they present internal transformations that are not always successful or beneficial. On the other hand, many literary teen film adaptations are classified as romantic comedies, presenting what is arguably the most identifiable trope of the genre: a socially inferior girl is turned from geeky nerd to superficial beauty through a glamorous makeover.

Many teen films present makeovers as fun and empowering variations of the Cinderella myth (Colling, 2017, p. 28). However, instead of a fairy godmother figure performing makeovers, a female friend usually acts as the makeover artist. The female protagonist is frequently cast as the traditional Cinderella figure: "Cinderella's transformation personifies in the familiar and easily identifiable tropes of the makeover and reveals the idea of the adolescent girl as a figure in process" (Colling, 2017, p. 28). Just like Cinderella, some literary teen film adaptations convey makeovers as the ultimate manifestation of female empowerment because they show that feminine clothes, makeup, and stylish hair can transform downtrodden, dull-looking girls into beautiful and popular young women. It is important to note that female figures depicted in canonical literature are not usually presented as Cinderella figures. Their makeovers usually take place over lengthy periods of time, can be degrading for the characters, and their effects rarely endure.

## *Emma* and P*ygmalion*

I will now provide case studies of the canonical literary texts *Emma* (Austen, 1815/2017) and *Pygmalion* (Shaw, 1912/2003) to examine how they use written words to depict makeovers. I will also analyse how the makeovers in these texts attempt to transform socially inferior female figures into women who abide by social and cultural expectations of woman – specifically that they reside within the domestic sphere. Examining the representation of makeovers in these two texts will allow me to later compare the ways in which their respective teen film adaptations, *Clueless* (Heckerling, 1995) and *She's All That* (Iscove, 1999), revise the original plots, themes and characters to give new meaning to the makeover.

Canonical literary texts do not always present makeovers as initiated to craft female beauty. In Jane Austen's 1815 novel *Emma*, female domesticity is presented as the ultimate virtue of

female life. The novel presents a world in which marriage and motherhood define female life. Physical appearance is an important factor in attracting male suitors, but not as important as possessing social propriety or coming from a socially distinguished family. Mr Knightley contends this, stating that even though Harriet Smith is "a very pretty girl … Men of family would not be very fond of connecting themselves with a girl of such obscurity" (Austen, 1815/2017, p. 49).

Harriet's makeover is not instigated by a man to correct her behaviour. Nonetheless, it serves patriarchal ideologies of social propriety and upper-class connections that make women suitable wives for gentlemen. As someone whose privileged father moulded her to embody these ideals, Emma has the insight to teach Harriet how to become desired by men. Harriet's makeover involves internal adjustments, as her unknown parentage place her in an inferior social position to many of the gentlemen of Highbury. Emma believes that she can take Harriet under her wing, "detach her from her bad acquaintance and introduce her into good society" (Austen, 1815/2017, p. 17). In turn, Emma is a stand-in for a man who regulates Harriet's personality.

Harriet's makeover is slowly achieved through time. It is not made explicit, but the novel subtly conveys that, with each meeting with Emma, Harriet changes in some regard. Her makeover is non-visceral and nuanced. Her character development is slowly revealed in the details of her behaviour. It is apparent that she has developed, in some regard, when she first refuses the proposal of Robert Martin, because she was taught by Emma that accepting him would hinder her social propriety.

When Harriet's makeover is shown to be complete, the novel positions Harriet's change as negative. She has been imbued with Emma's confidence, assertion, and has acquired the ability to fit into Emma's social circle. However, this troubles Emma. Harriet is made confident enough to believe that she could make a match with Mr Knightley, stating "now I seem to feel that I may deserve him" (Austen, 1815/2017, p. 316). Emma is bothered by Harriet's transformation, as she realises that she is herself in love with Mr Knightley. Fortunately for Emma, Harriet ends up marrying Robert Martin, a union that places Harriet in a lower social position to Emma. As a result, the friendship between Harriet and Emma is changed "into a calmer sort of goodwill" (Austen, 1815/2017, p. 372).

George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* similarly represents a makeover that is initiated to transform a socially inferior woman to meet the expectations of men and afford the female protagonist, Eliza Doolittle, a conventional female life in which she becomes a wife. Unlike the makeover presented in *Emma*, Eliza's makeover is completely controlled by men. Eliza is first introduced as an inarticulate flower girl who gains the attention of Professor Henry Higgins, a linguistics professor. She is deemed coarse and unladylike because she wears a dusty straw hat, "shoddy black coat", "a brown skirt with a coarse apron", and a pair of boots "much the worse for wear" (Shaw, 1912/2003, p. 11). Professor Henry Higgins punishes Eliza for her off-putting appearance, ridiculing her with phrases like a "squashed cabbage leaf" (Shaw, 1912/2003, p. 18). Higgins is outspokenly patriarchal in the way he judges female appearance and behaviour and, in turn, regulates it. He believes that with his teachings, he can pass off Eliza, an "incarnate insult to the English language", as "the Queen of Sheba" (Shaw,

1912/2003, p. 18). He also tells Eliza that with his teachings, she "shall marry an officer in the Guards, with a beautiful moustache: the son of a marquis" (Shaw, 1912/2003, p. 33).

With the help of Higgins, Eliza is taught self-care. With a change of attire and a wash of the face and body, Eliza turns into "a dainty and exquisitely clean young Japanese lady in a simple blue cotton kimono printed cunningly with small white jasmine blossoms" (Shaw, 1912/2003, pp. 47-48). Her transformation pleases her father, Higgins and Pickering, as they each appear shocked by her transformation. Higgins states, "What's that? This!", and Pickering exclaims, "By Jove!" (Shaw, 1912/2003, p. 48). This reveal, and the men's reactions to Eliza's new appearance, suggest that because the men approve of what they see, Eliza's life will change for the better.

Eliza succeeds in her final test to pass herself off as a duchess at the ambassador's garden party. However, this does not secure the future she wanted for herself. Although she has learned how to craft beauty and appear as a proper English lady, her life does not improve. Eliza has not been trained in any special skill, and Higgins cannot guarantee Eliza's future prosperity. Neither marriage nor riches await her. Angrily noting the worthlessness of her makeover, she asks Higgins, "What am I fit for? What have you left me fit for? Where am I to go? What am I to do? What's to become of me?" (Shaw, 1912/2003, p. 78).

The makeovers presented in *Clueless* and *She's All That* are exceedingly different in tone and style to their originals. In addition to their social and cultural values being revised, cinematic modes of storytelling such as mise-en-scène, editing and sound, and visual point of view have reshaped their narratives.

I will now briefly discuss Naomi Wolf's concept of the beauty myth (1990), and Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze (1975/1992), to lay the theoretical ground for an analysis of makeover representations in *Clueless* and *She's All That*. When female social value "could no longer be defined as the attainment of virtuous domesticity", the beauty myth took over as a means of social control (Wolf, 1990, p. 7). After the industrial revolution, the beauty myth rose to prominence in the minds of Western women, and redefined "a woman's primary social value [a]s the attainment of virtuous beauty" (Wolf, 1990, p. 7). Wolf argues that the myth is a falsehood that structures beauty as a physical, innate quality (1990, p. 2). It promotes the idea that beauty "objectively and universally exists" (Wolf, 1990, p. 2). According to Wolf, it is an entirely patriarchal invention that tells a very particular story (1990, p. 2). Beauty "is biological, sexual and evolutionary: strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful" (Wolf, 1990, p. 2). Men only want to possess women who are beautiful, and since they are the pickers and choosers of women, women must embody beauty in order to be selected (Wolf, 1990, p. 2). As a result, beauty in women is valued as a necessity, as it is their only way to be desired and admired by the opposite sex.

When teen girl figures cultivate themselves to become desired and admired by the opposite sex, the success of their endeavours is marked by the male gaze. The male gaze, as theorised by Laura Mulvey investigates the ways in which female figures in film and media are portrayed as objects of sexual desire. Mulvey (1992, p. 27) states that, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female". Through camera and editing techniques, "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed,

with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1992, p. 27).

### *She's All That*

In *She's All That,* the teen film adaptation of *Pygmalion,* the makeover is emphasised as an essential life lesson that redeems the downtrodden, dull-looking, insecure Laney Boggs (Rachael Leigh Cook). Mackenzie Siler (Anna Paquin) is Zack Siler's (Freddie Prinze Jr.) makeup-loving younger sister. Like Cinderella's fairy godmother figure, Mackenzie is employed by Zach to use her expertise in girl culture to make-over Laney from geek to chic.

Unlike many films of this genre, the makeover scene in *She's All That* is quite intimate. Only Laney and Mackenzie are in the bathroom. Men are positioned as inactive bystanders, rather than teachers. The makeover scene does not offer a montage of shots set to music, as is sometimes the case with this trope, but as Maryn Wilkinson has observed, it does show a small portion of Laney's makeover, "making *visible* the transformation process" (Wilkinson, 2015, p. 386). Mackenzie tweezes Laney's eyebrows, glides a makeup brush over her chin, and pulls out Laney's braid, telling her that "this particular coif doesn't really go with your face shape" (Iscove*,* 1999, 0:39:09). This makeover scene has a calm tone, as the application of makeup is slow and seemingly pleasurable. Rather than provide a soundtrack to the makeover, the conversation between the girls is all that is audible. This scene, however, perpetuates the beauty myth as being somehow normative and universal: neither Laney nor Mackenzie reflects in any critical way on the makeover activities they undertake.

Like *Pygmalion,* most of Laney's makeover is not visualised on screen, and so it is compressed into a reveal. Laney's reveal begins at the top of a staircase, and her descent is a spectacle. It is her catwalk moment. Samantha Colling, in her study of girl teen films, describes this type of event as "the moment of glamour, an instance that creates an experience of admiration, effortlessness, public intimacy, and sensations of promise and possibility" (2017, p. 64). As "Kiss Me" (by Sixpence None the Richer) begins to play, Mackenzie announces Laney. She describes this version of Laney as "the new, not improved, but different, Laney Boggs" (Iscove*,* 1999, 0:40:02). The camera slowly pans up to reveal Laney's full-body transformation. Her art smock has been swapped for a tight-fitting red dress and a pair of red high-heeled sandals. The dress hugs Laney's figure, creating shape and definition that her art smock hides. Her hair is cut into a short bob, and her glasses are replaced with contacts, showing off her bright, petite face. As she reaches the bottom of the staircase, she turns and, facing the camera, presents a shy smile. With trendier clothes, a new haircut, and some makeup, not to mention the absence of her glasses, Laney Boggs transforms into the "beautiful" Cinderella figure. This sequence is greatly in excess of its literary original. With its use of costume, mise-en-scène, soundtrack and a choreographed catwalk reveal to introduce Laney's new self, the sequence makes obvious that her new self is "better" because she has become "beautiful".

Before we even see Laney, the song "Kiss Me" (1998), used as a soundtrack, underscores the success of her makeover. With lyrics that predict a romantic night ahead, the song introduces Laney as an object of desire. Laney's future prosperity is assured when she receives Zack's

male gaze. It is made explicit that Laney has become the embodiment of heterosexual desire, as the film's cinematographer, Francis Kenny, pans the camera up from Laney's feet to her face, indicating that the scene is being played out through the perspective of Zack's male gaze. As the camera lingers on Zack's reaction, there is an unspoken sense of attraction as he views Laney as an object of sexual desire. This scene differs from the reveal depicted in *Pygmalion*, which only presents readers with what Higgins, Pickering and Mr Doolittle say. We know that they are satisfied with Eliza's makeover through their dialogue, but since readers never get to see from their perspective, the male gaze is represented to a lesser degree. The fact that film editor Casey O. Rohrs accompanied this catwalk sequence with the romantic track "Kiss Me", and abruptly stops the track when Laney stumbles into Zack's arms, emphasises that this moment marks their turn from acquaintances to potential romantic partners. Laney's smile at the end of her catwalk indicates the pleasure she feels in gaining Zack's male gaze, and therefore, his approval.

The future romance which this scene implies strengthens the idea that when girls receive the male gaze, their lives can genuinely improve. As a result of her makeover into a feminine and desirable beauty, Laney is nominated for prom queen and attracts a cult following. This contrasts starkly with Laney's initial persona as the geeky girl whose tormentors labelled her as "superfreak" (Iscove*,* 1999, 0:32:57), and it suggests that there is abundant transformative power in the teen makeover.

***Clueless***

In Amy Heckerling's *Clueless,* a makeover scene is presented where the Harriet Smith figure, Tai Frasier (Brittany Murphy), receives a makeover, and its success is marked by the boys who admire her. There is no blatant depiction of the male gaze in this film (perhaps because *Clueless* was directed by a woman), but the film does show that men must be satisfied with a girl's appearance for girls to transcend social poverty.

*Clueless* first presents Tai as someone who identifies with "alternative" subcultures. She has tattoos on her arms, wears baggy brown pants and an oversized flannel shirt, and she has dyed red hair. Her appearance dramatically contrasts with Cher Horowitz (Alicia Silverstone) and the rest of the San Fernando Valley "in crowd" who wear preppy, feminine, fashion ensembles. Tai's appearance attracts the attention of Cher, who desires to give her a makeover and turn her into a "beautiful" valley girl like herself.

Tai's makeover follows the formula of the Cinderella makeover, where importance is placed on good hair, clothes, and their ability to reveal the "grace" and "beauty" "dormant in the character" (Colling, 2017, p. 28). Tai's makeover is presented as a joyful experience, as the film's editor, Debra Chiate, edits this sequence into a fast-paced montage set to "Supermodel" sung by Jill Sobule (1995). Cinematographer Bill Pope captures the significant makeover moments that show Tai's physical transformation, such as when the hair dye is washed out of Tai's hair and makeup is applied. He also captures the moment Cher goes through her own wardrobe and cuts a t-shirt into a bellybutton-baring crop top. Time is also altered and sped up, as the camera shifts from room to room, with each scene no more than nine seconds.

This sequence is also played out in the form of a lesson. As Tai watches Cher make her over, she is also observing the techniques for beautification, and learning how to regulate feminine appearance for herself. This mirrors Emma and Harriet's relationship, as through observation and modelling, Tai and Harriet become more like Cher and Emma, respectively. This sequence has an energetic, light-hearted and optimistic tone. The manner in which Tai poses, plays with her hair, jumps around, laughs and smiles displays her enjoyment. The final shot of the makeover shows Tai sizing herself up in the mirror. Tai's hair is curly, makeup has been applied to her face, and she wears a mini skirt with a knitted jumper. Smiling and jumping around, Tai raises her arms in the air as a sign of victory.

The next day at school, Tai is shown walking side by side with Cher and Dionne. It is apparent that her makeover has been successful, as male students are shown watching Tai. This male gaze sets off approving looks that are noted by Cher and Dionne, who then look approvingly at Tai. The girls consider this attention as a sign that Tai's makeover has been successful, and a verification that Tai is a member of the San Fernando Valley "in crowd".

The male gaze is an essential part of Tai's makeover. As Mulvey argues in relation to the male gaze, women are "simultaneously looked at and displayed", their appearance "coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey, 1992, p. 27). In being put on display by Cher and Dionne, Tai is possessed by her male peers: she is presented for their pleasure. Cher's and Dionne's gleeful responses to Tai's makeover, and Tai's growing self-confidence and pleasure, do suggest that these young women find genuine pleasure and agency in these makeover rituals, but at the end of the day, they are in the service of men.

While approving looks from male characters play an important role in facilitating Tai's acceptance at school, the male gaze is not represented in the same way in *Emma*. As Harriet's makeover artist, Emma is aware of the power of the male gaze, and she uses her knowledge of high society to transform Harriet into a woman who somewhat fits the mould of what Highbury gentlemen desire. With such expertise, Emma can be seen as an agent of the system who promotes the idea that women's lives can only improve once men look on them and feel erotic pleasure. Despite Emma's efforts, Harriet can never quite rid herself of her reputation as an illegitimate daughter, and so she is never seen as an appropriate match for one of Highbury's elite bachelors. Her beauty is admired by some, like Mr Knightley, but there is no indication in the text that he, nor any other gentleman, sees her as an object of sexual desire. This suggests that in the context of the novel, female beauty is not enough to capture fully the approving male gaze.

These makeover and catwalk sequences represent a tension between empowerment and oppression. The makeovers are highlighted as fulfilling life experiences – where girls embrace femininity and see girl culture as empowering – but the beauty myth is always there, controlling how they regulate their bodies. Catwalk moments are also presented as empowering because they can be seen as rites of passage towards a greater sense of self and agency. When "Girl culture presents pleasure as the utopian source of social transformation" (Speed, 1995, p. 24), the pleasure and value Tai and Laney receive through their catwalks seemingly permits their

lives to change for the better. However, this is only possible after they receive the approval of men through the male gaze.

## Conclusion

Social and cultural ideals and beliefs shape contemporary revisions of canonical literary texts. Screen adaptations also revise such texts through cinematic narrative techniques such as mise-en-scène and point of view. In the teen film adaptations of *Emma* and *Pygmalion* considered above, third wave feminism has had a clear influence, especially in the presentation of makeover moments as personally liberating. However, these cinematic makeovers – informed by the mechanisms of the male gaze and perpetrating notions of female beauty as innate and valued – continue to serve male power, as they did in the literary originals. While the unsuccessful makeovers presented in *Emma* and *Pygmalion* are shown as futile experiences, *Clueless* and *She's All That* present makeovers as simultaneously empowering and oppressive. While Tai and Laney may smile and feel excited during their empowering transformations, their futures seem to be shaped by patriarchal ideologies of female beauty and male desire.

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