

“Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts.”
Adapting 19th century texts for the 21st century Feminist Audience:
Greta Gerwig’s *Little Women* and Autumn de Wilde’s *Emma*

Film adaptations, considering their predominant intermedial nature (cf. Hutcheon 2006: 6-8; Rajewski 2005: 53), transfer a novel’s words onto the screen and thus realise the transition from diegetic to mimetic mode (Hutcheon 13). In the process of doing so, filmmakers and screenwriters have the chance to change and appropriate canonical texts in order to create a product that is not only digestible for the contemporary audience but also highlights its cultural significance. Two movies that are created by an all-women creative team, in which I include director, screenwriter, and original author, that have highlighted this relationship and continuous discourse of re-telling a story of the 19th in the 21st century, are Greta Gerwig’s 2019 adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868-1869) and Autumn de Wilde’s 2020 adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815) with a screenplay by Eleanor Cotton.

In Gerwig’s and de Wilde’s works, I argue, the female protagonists are blueprints for feminist discourse that permeates the twenty-first century adaptations of the original material, abandoning slavish faithfulness in favour of a more nuanced and explicit feminist critique of contemporary society. The genre of adaptation thus allows for a discursive engagement by women filmmakers and screenwriters ushering in an openly revisionist gender egalitarian utopia in which former centuries are portrayed as less sexist and restrictive. To this effect, dialogue (based on the respective original sources), character development, and metatextual commentary add to the modernisation of the source text for a contemporary audience.

These revisions I argue work as feminist critique of 21st century society. Relying on gender and sexuality as key leitmotifs, adaptations aim to question past and present. In doing so, women’s take on canonical works of literature, but also the engagement in the ongoing discourse of adaptation studies, demonstrate women filmmakers and screenwriters’ reliance on canonical source texts to demonstrate a continuous need for feminist revisions.

Works

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Biography

Maria Juko completed her B.A. and M.Ed. in English and Biology for Secondary Education with a focus on Victorian Literature at the University of Hamburg. She currently holds a scholarship by the university where she is in her final stage of writing her PhD on female self-reliance in late 18th to mid-19th-century novels.