Bridget Jones: From Diary to Screenplay

“‘I will not: Drink more than fourteen alcohol units a week; smoke; spend more than earn; obsess about Daniel Cleaver’... 
“...I will: Be more assertive; make better use of time; eat more fiber; go to the gym three times not merely to buy sandwich; and form functional relationship with responsible adult.” (Fielding, 2-3).

Welcome to the life of Bridget Jones; a thirty-year-old Singleton, who loves her drinks, her smokes, her friends, her chocolate and self-help books, and who is constantly struggling with her weight, her single existence and the habit of falling for the wrong guys. Released in 1996, Bridget Jones’s Diary written by Helen Fielding, caused an enormous reaction amongst all the women who could find themselves in this desperate, emotionally, though humorous and touching single. Being the person she is, Bridget is the role model of a ‘real’ woman, who has to cope with all the problems, disasters and ‘what to wear issues’ as a lot of other (single) women do. For once, the woman protagonist is not extremely beautiful, thin or perfect, but just someone like me and you. Or as the review in the New York Times said: “Bridget Jones’s diary had made her the best friend of hundreds of thousands of women who recognize her closet drawers crammed with a fury black opaque pantyhose twisted into rope like tangles as their own.”

Being so well known and so loved all over the world; one can imagine that the most difficult part of the book-to-screen translation of Bridget Jones’s Diary was to find the right Bridget Jones. Same as the diary cannot exist without the recognizable character of Bridget, the film stands or falls by whether the actress playing Bridget can translate her character onto the screen and if she can put down a reliable performance. It was not very surprising then, that the casting of the skinny Texan Zellweger as the tubby English Jones caused quite some tumult among the lovers of Helen Fielding’s successful literary creation. What was the director thinking? How was she going to transform this Hollywood girl into an English ‘gal’ with stringy hair and a bloated face?

It may not seem like the most obvious actress to take, however, Sharon Maguire’s (the director) choice to pick Renee Zellweger for the role, turned out to be a very convincing one. After piling up quite some pounds for the look of Bridget, the tubby single was there, and although the English accent was not perfect all the time, the funny faces, humour and warmth really made Zellweger the ‘real’ personification of Bridget Jones.
However, it is not only the successful acting of Zellweger as the character of Bridget Jones that really made this movie such a success as the book. Also the supporting cast - including Hugh Grant as the sleazy Daniel Cleaver and Colin Firth as Mark Darcy – has been well chosen and has helped to lift the film up to a level where it could stand on its own. The same as Bridget becomes a real living character on the screen, so do Cleaver and Darcy as the sex driven boss versus the serious lawyer. Worth mentioning with this, is that both actors actually have been referred to in the real story. On page 171 Hugh Grant has been thought about as a ‘hot’ scoop for the television network and Firth even comes forward as the perfect actor if anyone had to play Mark Darcy (217). So, before there even was an idea for a movie, a part of the cast was already known and accepted by the audience.

Looking at the book-to-film-translation on the whole, there are not only the actors who keep the ‘essence’ of the film close to that of the book. While comparing the movie with the story, it is basically the overall idea and the main themes that have been used and kept to put the story onto the screen. Both the plot of the book and the movie evolve around the thirty-year-old Bridget and her struggle with her single life. Caught between her fellow single friends, the married couples, her parents and two men, both Fielding and Maguire set down the scenario of a person who tries to keep her life on an even keel. Also, both works contain the hilarious events such as the email-flirtation with Daniel, the ‘Smug-Married’ dinner party, the sliding down the fire pole and the not-forgettable scene of the blue soup.

However, although a lot of the basics and particular events of the story have been used, Bridget Jones’s Diary is not a literal translation of the book. The overall traits of the book are there, but certain things have been changed in order to make the movie more fit and more interesting to watch. Bridget Jones’s Diary is what one may call a traditional translation, as “a film based on a literary work carries its own distinctive ideas about the book, and filmmakers. take on the responsibility of attempting to capture and translate those essential qualities.” (Cahir, 97).

In this aspect, one of the biggest changes that Maguire has brought into her screenplay, is the rivalry between the two male protagonists. Looking at the original diary, this story handles mainly about Bridget’s own struggling with men and her bad habits in general (every chapter starts of with summary of how many calories, cigarettes and alcohol beverages have been consumed). Both Daniel and Darcy play their part, but they do not really come forward that much and they hardly interfere with each other.

In the movie, however, the tension between the two men is one of the big main themes which everything evolves around. Of course Bridget’s thoughts and point of view are what the movie is about, but at the same time, those thoughts are mainly about these two different men and how to eventually choose between them. A smart move of Maguire, as what
can be funnier and more interesting to watch than two men, opposite in every way, fighting and trying to conquer the heart of the chaotic single Bridget Jones?

However, the theme of ‘two men fighting over one girl’ is not the only thing that has been changed by Maguire. Being the translation of a ‘diary-form-of-novel’, it would have been impossible to capture every single event from day to day, as that would just have too many events to fit in one movie. Also, the description of a single day can be very interesting in a book or in a documentary; in romantic comedies this form of narration would probably not work. So, in order to order to keep the audience willing to watch and, at the same time, not to lose the ‘diary-aspect’ of the original story, a voice-over of Bridget has been used to capture the fluent narrative of the movie.

Other things that have been changed in order to keep the movie going and make events more interesting to watch, are the reducing, pulling together and adding of certain events. Opposite to the original story, Bridget does not run off at her first day with Daniel (claiming he only uses her as ‘emotional fuckwittage’) but instead, he pulls her skirt down and sees the huge underpants she is wearing. Also, the movie contains a hilarious karaoke scene, which the reader never knew of and instead of having the mum dating around different guys, she only sticks to one on the screen.

All in all, it looks like Maguire really thought about how exactly she wanted to translate this bestseller diary onto the screen. From the actors to the different events; not all the aspects could be captured, but everything has been thought about and the right decisions have been made in order to both interpret and exploit the source text (Cahir, 97). As one might know, book-to-screen adoptions are not easy, but with Bridget Jones Diary Maguire has proved that she could make a work that on many levels is a great incarnation of the novel, but at the same time a work that really stands on its own. In this way, Bridget Jones’s Diary is not only the visual translation of a diary, but also the visual birth of a real woman.

Used literary sources:


Movie credits:

**Bridget Jones’s Diary**, UK/France, 2001

Production: Helen Fielding, Drew Jones e.o.

Director: Sharon Maguire

Scenario: Andrew Davies

Editor: Martin Walsh.

Art direction: Shana Nieberg

Music: Patrick Doyle

Cast: Renee Zellweger, Hugh Grant, Colin Firth, e.o..