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Bringing Portraits Alive: Catherine Paula Han Interviews Andrea Galer, the Costume

Designer for

Jane Eyre (BBC, 2006)

ABSTRACT: A prominent costume designer, Andrea Galer has contributed to several Brontë adaptations and Brontë-inspired works, most notably *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006). In this interview, she discusses the adaptation and her other work, relating her screen projects to her activism supporting contemporary craft and ethically traded fashion. She recounts her research and design process, offering insights that shed light on costume drama more generally. Her perspective elucidates the theoretical debates surrounding the genre's authenticity and its representation of the past.

KEY PHRASES: Andrea Galer, Costume Design, *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006), screen adaptation.

Andrea Galer is a prominent and BAFTA-winning costume designer who has worked on several adaptations of the Brontës' novels, most notably 'Jane Eyre' (BBC, 2006).¹ The television miniseries won her a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Costumes in 2007 and earned her a nomination for a Costume Designers' Guild Award in 2008. Another Brontë project she has participated in is an as-yet-uncompleted, multi-media interpretation of 'Wuthering Heights'. She was also the

costume designer for 'Firelight' (William Nicholson, 1999), a film loosely inspired by Charlotte Brontë's novel 'Jane Eyre'.²

During her illustrious career, Andrea has made a significant contribution to cinema and television. Highlights of her work include being the co-designer on 'Don't Look Now' (dir. Nicholas Roeg, 1973)³ and acting as the costume designer for the cult favourite 'Withnail and I' (dir. Bruce Robinson, 1987).⁴ Though she continues to be involved with a range of screen genres, Andrea is particularly known for her exquisite period costumes. She has employed her creative talents in several well-regarded film and television adaptations of nineteenth-century classic novels.

I was fortunate enough to visit and interview Andrea in her design studio located in north London. A treasure trove, the space contains her collection of film and television costumes; her assortment of antique clothing and accessories; pieces from her craft and fashion brand; as well as the books and other items that provide her with inspiration. We talked specifically about her contribution to 'Jane Eyre' (2006), but she also shared more general insights relating to the process of researching and creating period costumes. The conversation continued via email, in which Andrea strove to emphasise the seamlessness of her many projects.

Catherine Paula Han: Before we talk about your costumes for *Jane Eyre* [2006], could you describe your interest in the Brontës more generally?

Andrea Galer. The Brontës are probably the most, in my opinion, soulful writers that you could choose. They're writers you can identify with, which is something that we all need. I'm interested in them as women, living in an isolated part of the country, during the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution and the political turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars. I'm also really drawn to how living in a wild environment, like the moors, affects one's behaviour and what someone wears.

Furthermore, I think it is fascinating trying to understand the social connections between writers, such as Fanny Trollope and Jane Austen; Elizabeth Gaskell and the Brontës; Anthony Trollope and Charles Dickens. I'm interested in the interplay between novelists and the influence they had on each other.

I had an understanding of the Brontës' situation from my education, but my interest has built over the course of my career. I've always loved literature from my schooldays, but I've forged a deeper connection with writers' minds and characters' feelings during my career by using the talent that I have to develop costumes for costume dramas.

C.P.H.: Your work on *Jane Eyre* [2006] is the most obvious example of a Brontë-related project, but have the sisters' novels and lives inspired you in other instances?

A.G.: Yes. When I worked on the film *Firelight* [1999], Bill's [Nicholson] script and direction meant that I intentionally tried to create costumes that emphasised the narrative's resemblance to *Jane Eyre* [1847].

C.P.H.: It's striking how emotionally you respond to the Brontës. Do your feelings have an impact on how you design costumes?

A.G.: All my work has an emotional basis—it is important because I design and make costumes that enable actors to communicate characters and their feelings.

C.P.H.: Do your emotions guide how you reconstruct a period's clothing? How does that connect with your research process?

A.G.: As well as my emotions, my approach relies upon many years of knowledge as well as finding new sources. I look at old magazines (which have often been going for hundreds of years); find reference books; and visit museums, art

galleries and heritage houses. In all these places, you can find painters and illustrators whose work you like. Over the years, I've collected loads of books but remain aware that the current art scene is also relevant. To get a feel for a period, you've also got to go and sit in galleries. When you've amassed all this material, you put together mood boards and hope that your inspirations will flow across into your costumes.

Film scripts dictate how you adapt characters and the novel is not always foremost in my mind. Reading the novel isn't an my part of research and it's invariably upsetting that the very process of filming means the result is different from how my mind visualised things when I read the book. There are lots of factors that come into play. Much gets lost when you have to think about sustaining an audience's attention and interest for the show's duration. Also, the person playing the part has a big impact on what I design and what viewers end up seeing.

Despite all these considerations, my emotions remain important to what I do. With costumes, you start to bring somebody alive. It's essential to feel that I've done that in order to help the person playing the part believe in what they are wearing.

C.P.H.: Before this interview, we discussed how you used portraits as the basis for the costumes in *Jane Eyre* [2006] and your other designs.

A.G.: Yes. Portraits are a key aspect of my research but are, to some degree, deceptive. Throughout history, painters have brought people alive but have had to balance what their eyes see with ensuring that the clothing and background convey the sitter's social standing. The more you study portraits in galleries and heritage houses, the more the subjects look similar and I try to look beyond that. Often, people were painted by the same artists—like Gainsborough—to reflect the

fashions of the time. Though I draw on the portraits, I also try to think about who the sitter was behind the portrait, the way they dressed in daily life and how it would have contrasted with their formal image. In some ways, you are always playing games. If we haven't got actual facts, we can only read or look at something and think, maybe it was like this or maybe like that.

C.P.H.: In *Jane Eyre* [2006], I was struck by the allusions to famous imagery and portraits of Charlotte Brontë. In particular, one of Jane's [Ruth Wilson] dresses has a sort of red tie or bow around the neck [see Figure 1]. Could you elaborate on your specific references?

A.G.: After I've done my research, I use what will move me the most and with *Jane Eyre* [2006] that was the J.H. Thompson portrait of Charlotte Brontë.⁵ I'm not the only person to have done it—there's something particular about the reddish colouring of her grey dress. As a costume designer creating a character, I came to rely upon the colour motif to reflect who Jane was and how she felt at particular times.

At the beginning, red represented fear and I used it to reflect her initial insecurity that love would never come her way. For example, she felt afraid seeing Rochester [Toby Stephens] appear in red when she saw him out hunting. There was also a red cloth hanging from the window of the tower where the trapped and haunted Bertha [Claudia Coulter] was kept. It seemed to me that the red created a connection between the two fictional women and the Brontës' existence. Charlotte herself lived and wrote in an isolated, wild part of the country.

To show all these connections, I tried to bring Thompson's portrait to life. The grey fabric was dyed with several layers of colour to give a slightly warm tone. Then I added the red tie, which was knotted in an unusual way, rather than a bow.

When she wore it, it seemed to me to be a means to suggest that Jane had let go of her fear. She could offer Rochester her soul and passion to gain the caring love that Charlotte did not find for herself until she married Arthur Bell Nichols. There's a lot to that dress. It was something that moved me.

[Figure 1 to be inserted here].

[Caption] Figure 1. Photograph taken on set of Ruth Wilson modelling the costume inspired by J.H. Thompson's portrait and worn by her character in *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006).

C.P.H.: I've watched a lot of *Jane Eyre* screen adaptations, and I think there's always a challenge with her costuming in that she always seems to be just wearing 'another grey dress'.

A.G.: Exactly.

C.P.H.: So how did you overcome this issue?

A.G.: In recreating the grey dress that Charlotte wore in J.H. Thompson's portrait, I felt I had to reflect her emotions and, in many ways, mine as well. I put the most time and money into this particular costume. It was made of a lightweight silk, which was then dyed with the red tone and then broken down to give it a worn look. It's an expensive process, but my aim was to make the dress look like bombazine, which was a popular material at the time that combined silk with wool to make a heavier fabric. The lighter weight of Jane's silk gave her costume more movement and ensured that it wouldn't appear to be 'just another grey dress'.

C.P.H.: Of course, Jane's character has several dresses. I thought that she was quite stylish. How did you manage to create variation in her costumes?

A.G.: It wasn't my intention to create a fashionable or stylish character, but if she had worn the same outfit continuously I would have had to make doubles or even trebles of that costume. My budget wouldn't have stretched to cover the cost! In the past, productions would budget for doubles of costumes in case of mishaps but this doesn't happen today.

When working on a show, you have to make several repeats of costumes if the action includes blood, food or fire—and there's the risk of other unexpected accidents happening. Additionally, there are constantly weather issues. In this show, scenes shot on the moor were extremely muddy and the rain was impossible to ignore. Furthermore, *Jane Eyre's* [2006] stunt performers needed separate repeat costumes for when they did blood, fire or muddy scenes. You also have to take into account the amount of time the outfit is being worn and that it will need washing and dry cleaning, particularly with items like underwear, shirts, socks and tights.

Plus, it's more interesting for the audience to see Jane in several costumes. I used bits of tatting and other fabrics to create variation in the dresses that Jane wore; these embellishments were intended to break up the outfit but were deliberately modest.

My personal and emotional interests also had a bearing on how I approached the issue of Jane's costumes. When adding embellishments, I am inspired by craft—both by its history and contemporary status. *Jane Eyre* [2006] was filmed in Derbyshire, and I was aware that, during the period, many women in that

area were employed in the harsh occupations of lace making, tatting, crochet, ribbon production, hosiery making and fabric weaving. To illustrate the links between these injustices in history and today, I used tatting for Jane's dress that was made by female craft workers based in Sri Lanka who I became involved with after the devastation of the 2004 tsunami.

C.P.H.: I'd like to discuss the connection between *Jane Eyre* [2006] and your project in Sri Lanka in more depth. First, though, I'd like to return to your sources. You used the Thompson work but I also perceived references to Branwell Brontë's 1834 portrait of his sisters.⁶ I think you can see a similarity between his depiction of Charlotte, Emily and Anne with the production's portrayal of Diana [Annabel Scholey] and Mary [Emma Lowndes] Rivers. Did Branwell's painting inspire you?

A.G.: Yes. The sisters weren't in the adaptation much, but they were in my mind. There's the period when Jane runs away from Rochester and sets up a school; it was like she'd gone to her sisters. There's something very sensitive about that picture—quite ghost-like, I think—and I was taken with the fineness of the shawls. For the production, I needed more time and money to make the sisters' shawls in the way that I wanted.

C.P.H.: What difficulties did you have with bringing Branwell's portrait of his sisters alive?

A.G.: As I said, I would have liked to have had more time and money. A costume designer doesn't make costumes, but brings in and organises the right team. It's with this team that I set up temporary workshops for different productions whilst remaining responsible for controlling the overall look of the show's costumes. The process has become much harder in contrast to previous years when television

shows were planned and budgeted a year in advance. It's a regrettable system because the fast turnaround means that corners get cut. When you have to get somebody to run something up quickly, you don't have the time to perfect it and you end up thinking, 'that looks a bit crude'. When I interpreted Branwell's painting for the characters of Diana and Mary Rivers, their costumes and collars had to be completed within a day and were not quite as I wanted them to be.

I didn't succeed with that, but I remain happy with my interpretation of Thompson's portrait of Charlotte. I was allotted enough time and money for Jane's governess dress and much more went into getting that right. I'd like to try again on Branwell's painting. If I find another chance to bring that portrait of the three of them alive, I will.

C.P.H.: So after you've collected your sources and inspirations, what's the next stage in making the costumes? How do you start putting the clothing together?

A.G.: In *Jane Eyre* [2006], and all the other period productions I've done, I've mainly used original trim with fabrics from today. In my opinion, it is the basis for making something look period. It's become harder to find and buy antique pieces, which is a shame because you need a stable of old things to pull together in order to make something that really works on camera.

When I can't find contemporary or antique pieces that will work for what I have in mind, I try to locate examples of ethically made products instead. In *Jane Eyre* [2006], I used the lace produced by the Sri Lankan women who were supported by my foundation, the Power of Hands.

I've done this throughout my career and I have working relationships that go back many years. For example, when I started my fashion label and designed the

costumes for the film *Withnail and I* [Bruce Robinson, 1987], I built up a connection with weavers in Scotland. The same weavers provided the Harris Tweed for my Country Wear suit collection that I also used for the Dent twins' [Amy and Beth Steel] riding habits in *Jane Eyre* [2006]. Subsequently, I based a jacket from my collection, the Jane Eyre jacket, on these costumes and reused the fabric. The twins' habits also included lace that I had designed—I love the contrasting bright colours with the lace. Furthermore, that lace was the creative inspiration for Jane's wedding dress when she first attempts to marry Rochester.

C.P.H.: Jane's wedding dress is a beautiful costume [See Figure 2].

I could really appreciate the fineness of the handmade lace when I saw the dress in your studio. Could you say a bit more about how the lace resulted from your foundation, the Power of Hands?

A.G.: I set up the Power of Hands in order to develop the quality of and demand for ethically traded fashion goods. More specifically, I aimed to upgrade the skills of female lace makers in Sri Lanka so that I could incorporate their beautiful handmade lace into my costume designs, bridal wear and other items from my fashion label. With my experience and reputation, I hoped to improve the standard of these cottage industry workers' products to market and sell their work fairly.

I became involved after the 2004 tsunami. I felt I had to go and do something about the devastation. On my first trip to Sri Lanka, I came to understand the plight of the lace makers who struggle to make a living creating handmade bobbin lace. Portuguese colonists had introduced the craft in the fifteenth century and it was at that time a much-prized commodity made exclusively for court wear. It was completely and utterly unknown to me that all these women on the planet were doing bobbin lace. The truth is that lace making is so labour intensive and time

consuming that it shouldn't be done at all unless it's recompensed at a decent hourly rate.

[Insert Figure 2 here. Caption: An on-set photograph from *Jane Eyre* (BBC, 2006) of Ruth Wilson wearing the wedding dress that featured ethically produced lace.]

C.P.H.: So how did your commitment to the Sri Lankan crafters result in you using their handmade lace in *Jane Eyre* [2006]?

A.G.: When I founded the Power of Hands, I began by setting up an assessment and training centre to try to help the women get back on their feet. The aim was to help them earn a decent wage by improving the quality and range of their products. It was a massive undertaking. Unlike in previous situations where I could rely upon established co-operatives, I had to set up the co-operative myself and I became responsible for creating the not-for-profit trading arm of the Power of Hands.

There was an added challenge because I wanted to create a synergy between the Power of Hands with my work as a costume designer and a fashion designer. I've always tried to link my projects together, whether that's my film and television costume designs; the promotion of craft and ethical trade; my exhibitions or my fashion label. Therefore, I thought 'I've got to do something significant with the lace from Sri Lanka because I'm trying to help those women.' *Jane Eyre* [2006] provided a chance to try.

The lace—in terms of its history but also as a product—was really pivotal in doing *Jane Eyre* [2006]. However, I could only really do it with Jane's costumes. It wasn't sophisticated enough for the female guests that attend Rochester's house

party and who, living in that part of the country, would have worn silk fabric probably woven in Macclesfield. They wouldn't have been wearing bobbin lace, it wasn't the 'in' thing.⁷

C.P.H.: It's interesting that you felt that the lace wasn't sophisticated enough for Mr Rochester's female houseguests' costumes. Do you feel an obligation to make sure your costumes are as authentic as possible?

A.G.: I don't get it wrong if I can help it. I don't like to use things that weren't available or right for the period. Sometimes you have to but, ideally, I don't want to do something that wouldn't have been possible at the time.

Having said that, the problem with the Victorian period was that it's quite austere and people didn't reveal very much of themselves. So, yes, I played around with dates. I dressed *Jane Eyre's* [2006] houseguests in outfits from around 1835, even though Jane's clothing was from the late 1840s. It probably wasn't quite right to do that—Jane was ahead of the houseguests who, if anything, would have been more fashion-forward. However, I just wanted to do it that way! I couldn't make it work for what I wanted to do without setting the houseguests in that rather bizarre decade. I took the licence that, living in the country, they could have been behind the times. The 1830s seemed to work for Adèle's [Cosima Littlewood] character too—it helped me make her a bit more exotic.

C.P.H.: At the same time, do you feel that attempting to maintain authenticity is integral to what you do?

A.G.: I try to make it so, but you are led by a script. I did one Austen production where the director was very difficult to work with and didn't care if it looked period at all. I never want to do a show that I don't believe in and I've also built a

reputation for costume design that avoids 'fashion in your face'. I get hired on that basis and I try to remain sensitive to what a character would be likely to wear. I want it to be believed. I want it to be part of the whole.

C.P.H.: During my research, I've been looking at a screen adaptation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* filmed in 1968.⁸ Watching such material, I was struck by how costumes can date a production to the era in which it was made. As a costume designer, are you caught between trying to ensure that your work looks authentic to the nineteenth century but, at the same time, appealing to contemporary tastes?

A.G.: It's essential that clothing should flow, not jar, on the modern viewer. There are a lot of external factors that affect how a film's costumes reflect the date when they are produced. Innovations like digital cameras and new shooting techniques have changed my approach to designing clothing.

At the moment, though, we can't see how a costume dates a film or television show because that's how we currently envisage things were like. I don't know if it's possible for costumes to avoid dating a production for viewers in the future. We are really working of our time and you are going to find that problem when you look retrospectively at any period show. If you look back at many of Merchant Ivory's films, when those were originally released you thought that was absolutely how costumes should be. Now, they look a bit chocolate-boxy. More recently, though, things have maybe gone too far the other way and lots of film and television shows look stripped down. To me, now, a lot of costuming does look cliché because of time and money constraints. Occasionally, it appears that someone went 'oh this is a period look, put that on'. I'm not blaming the designers, but the conditions under which we work mean that the process can end up being like a sausage factory.

Trying to balance historical accuracy with modern tastes has led me to rely upon portraits to reconstruct a period's clothing. When I'm concerned about authenticity, I can always consult the portrait for how it looked. Yet as with all art, my designs reflect the era when they were made and, in forty years time, the costumes will no doubt date productions on which I worked.

C.P.H.: How did working with *Jane Eyre's* [2006] other production personnel shape your costume designs? How often did you meet with the director, Susanna White?

A.G.: *Jane Eyre* [2006] was a real sharing experience, with both the director and the actors. We were based in Derbyshire for several months, so Susanna and I did get together to discuss how to achieve the look we wanted.

In general, though, there isn't much time for collaboration once a producer has selected a team. Much of what happens is done on trust, and you have to hope that they like what you do. It happens so fast. You don't get much time to debate options and decisions have to be made within hours of meeting an actor. Sadly, fitting in meetings with the director becomes very difficult with all the prepping, the breaking down of scripts and the setting up of a costume department. Added to that, casting is often late!

C.P.H.: What about meeting with the actors?

A.G.: Usually, there's one quick session that lasts about three hours. After that, finding more fitting times does get difficult. You have to work so fast. It's a really horrible process due to the changes in how we produce viable dramas for television and cinema today. You get the clothes on and off the actor very quickly throughout the fitting and then you reflect afterwards about how to proceed. That's the point when you work out what does and doesn't work, what colour palette to use,

what scenes will work for the clothes, what money you can allot to the character, what you need and where you've got to go to achieve it. You just have to go for it really.

C.P.H.: How was it dressing Ruth Wilson?

A.G.: Well, wonderful because it was her first major part—a very big challenge for her. She left drama school and got that role! She's so very lovely, such a good actress and she emotionally threw herself into it, big time.

C.P.H.: Could you talk a little bit about her in the role? *Jane Eyre* [2006] is a very passionate interpretation of the novel. How aware were you of the production's emphases when making the costumes?

A.G.: On *Jane Eyre* [2006], I spent a lot of time with Ruth and it was obvious she was going to be very passionate in the role. We also worked well with Susanna, who is a emotionally motivated director. Ruth was very raw material to work with and responsive to the script's demands in all ways. She definitely influenced and responded to what I wanted to do—she connected with what she was wearing. In turn, on camera, she was emotionally totally engaged when she worked with Susanna. She was in it most days and filming was very intense for her.

C.P.H.: It sounds like an intense experience for everyone involved.

A.G.: Once I've produced the costumes for an actor and delivered them, I don't usually have much to do with that person once they're on the set. However, we were in Haddon Hall and that area for five months—a long time—while we were shooting. We got more emotionally involved with each other than you do when you're just shooting and going home every day. But Ruth's quite a wonderful person, a really special person. I follow her work and we're still friends.

C.P.H.: What else are you currently working on? I know you're particularly excited about the on-going evolution of your project *Threads of Time*.

A.G.: I have been costume designer on many shows since *Jane Eyre* [2006], and my various projects have evolved and come together in *Threads of Time*. "This is a series of short films which mix drama and documentary to tell the historical and contemporary story of the manufacture and trade of silk. It has expanded to include a website, plus events and installations showcasing the films that I have made and continue to make. The series is an ever-evolving way to create links between history and ethical trade with my work.

With my team, I'm trying to use exhibitions and launch events to broaden interest in my work and ethical trade. *Threads of Time* is site specific and we insert new footage from every location that we work with. I have been invited to set up exhibitions in several National Trust properties, including Fenton House and Ham House and other venues, such as Haddon Hall. This year I'm taking the project forward in several ways in different parts of the country. I have a collaborator in Liverpool and am working with heritage sites including Haddon Hall and Chatsworth House.

C.P.H.: What do you hope to achieve through producing *Threads of Time*?

A.G.: With *Threads of Time*, I want to help people understand the connections between politics, weavers, traders and our current lifestyles. In particular, we're trying to show the links between the industries that provide court and ceremonial wear with the history of the legal profession. With my team, I am producing films to show not only how these items were previously produced but also

to reveal the continuities between the past and present. I want to expose how the mass production of fashion and clothing leads to on-going human exploitation. I'm trying to attract the attention of people who can afford ethically produced fashion but don't wear it when they should.⁹

C.P.H.: Thank you Andrea. As a costume designer, I think you've given a unique insight into one aspect of the process of adapting novels for the screen. You've talked a lot about the emotional dimension of your work. It's also notable that in helping to transform *Jane Eyre* into a television production, you have had to rely on your imagination. In many ways, it's an apt approach to a writer who famously drew upon her imagination. You've offered a stimulating perspective on how people like yourself ensure that the Brontës continue to be such a fascinating part of our cultural landscape.

¹ *Jane Eyre*, BBC 1, 24 September 2006—15 November 2006.

² *Firelight*, dir. by William Nicholson (Buena Vista, 1997).

³ *Don't Look Now*, dir. by Nicholas Roeg (British Lion Film Corporation, 1973).

⁴ and *Withnail and I*, dir. by Bruce Robinson (Handmade Films, 1987).

⁵ J.H. Thompson, *Charlotte Brontë* (Brontë Parsonage Museum, date unknown).

⁶ Branwell Brontë, *The Brontë Sisters* (National Portrait Gallery, 1834).

⁷ For more detail upon Andrea's work with the lace makers and how she connects it to her current aims, see the short films on her website at: <http://www.andreagaler.co.uk/ag-films.html>.

⁸ *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, BBC 1, 28 December 1968—18 January 1969.

⁹ For more information about 'Threads of Time', see Andrea's website <http://www.andreagaler.co.uk/thread-of-time.html>.