

## Introduction

---

*Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald*

Timothy Corrigan has argued that the relationship between the two media of film and literature has “a history of ambivalence, confrontation, and mutual dependence,”<sup>1</sup> succinctly summing up the range of critical reaction to film productions of Jane Austen novels. The “mutual dependence” is evident: Austen films have brought her novels a far wider readership than she herself could have imagined. Undeniably, at least some viewers experience the films and then turn to the books for a deeper, richer, much more extended experience. Certainly, given modern proclivities, without the film as bait to attract more general readers and to help justify including the novels in school reading lists, Austen’s readership might well be a far more limited, esoteric group than it is today. Perfectly worthy writers of Austen’s time have been far less lucky than she; the enthusiasm for the redoubtable Henry Fielding that followed the wonderful Albert Finney screen version of *Tom Jones*<sup>2</sup> was brief and unsustainable once readers faced up to unfamiliar literary sensibilities and leisurely, extended texts. The story of Robinson Crusoe is made and remade (as in *Castaway* featuring Tom Hanks),<sup>3</sup> but it is safe to predict there will be no boom in Defoe book sales. Generally speaking, Austen is unique among writers of her period for none of her contemporaries transcend the narrow precincts of “classic literature” bookshelves. Modern interest in gender issues, of course, has much to do with this, allowing screenwriters to use her novels as valuable launching pads for filmic vehicles that track changing notions about women’s roles in society, with the virtue of no copyright restrictions. The symbiosis between Jane Austen’s prose fiction and its silver screen versions is a phenomenon worth exploring, for it is unique and rich in messages about current thinking, and not just about gender; the adaptations touch nerves concerning authenticity, social class, and literary sensibility.

The “ambivalence” that Corrigan sees in the literature–film relationship is also very true of scholarly attitudes toward the Austen films. One double-edged sword is Austen’s feminism, the very ambiguity of which has attracted some screenwriters: is she or isn’t she? Where does she

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79325-4 - Jane Austen on Screen

Edited by Gina MacDonald and Andrew MacDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald*

make her stand among the dug-in positions occupied in the current gender wars? There is room enough in the novels to swing the sword either way, cutting down male arrogance, duplicity, and outright chauvinism on one stroke yet also deftly drawing blood in the satire of women's ways and women's culture when the sword turns back. Ambivalence reigns in the readership as well: Austen's inspirational effect on feminist thought is apparent throughout the pages of this book, yet her readers also include the mirror images of feminists, legions of young women attracted by visions of traditional roles amid romantic settings. These latter are evident in myriads of fanzine reviews and Internet articles occupying Austen space; Pemberley is both a literary setting and a website, two manifestations of the imagination, traditional and contemporary, but mutually dependent. Ambivalence also permeates responses to the very filming of Austen's novels. Literary people – traditionalists and purists in the eyes of many practitioners of the youthful cinematic form – have at best felt reservations about the ability of a visual medium to measure up to the novels, regarding film as anything and everything from a presumptuous upstart to a manipulative commercialized instrument serving the lazy and vulgar. What begins as ambivalence can end as confrontation. The interjection, "But it wasn't as good as the book!" is often loaded with assumptions about culture high and low, and may reflect complex positioning of the speaker with regard to social class, education, taste, and sensibility. (Or the interjection may simply be true: many films, complex creations involving scores of makers and huge amounts of money, are not worthy of the unified prose which gave them life.)

If many literary people range from defensiveness to sure superiority when they evaluate a movie made from a literary work, film advocates tend to see adaptation differently. Just as theatrical producers and directors may understand dramatic scripts as instructions for putting on a play, and just as literary translators may regard the original work in the language of its creation as the jumping-off point for their own efforts, so film artists typically view the art of making a film from literature as a creative process in itself. The artist working in prose chooses her words and, editors aside, regards them as final. The artist working in celluloid dances a complex minuet involving the efforts of dozens of others, including craft workers with varying commitments and skill levels. Commands can be given, but results depend on cooperation and a joint vision. That film is a collaborative medium is driven home whenever the credits roll, but film people have a particular sensitivity to that fact: in the eyes of many producers and directors, it is a wonder that films get made at all.

Thus, the movement from literature to film is a translation from one medium to another, and, as with all translations, something is lost and

something gained. Film advocates assert that the final film product has as much validity and worth as, say, the translation of a poem from one language to another: the words will never be the same as the original, yet a careful, imaginative treatment can shed new light on the text and open up a new readership that brings new perspectives and new responses to the source. Traditionalists uncomfortable with this concept assert that no brief film can measure up to the subtlety, complexity, and intertextuality of an Austen novel, that even lengthy mini-series have proven wanting, and that, perforce, screenwriters and directors must slash the text to a manageable size and scale down the complexity of Austen's subtle and complex narrative voice to produce a focused, manageable "product" suitable for the screen. For the orthodox, cutting even minor characters and scenes means the destruction of the original. Traditionalists may fall in love with a particular visual moment where the filmmakers "get it right," but inevitably they miss their personal reading of Austen. Roger Gard in "A Few Skeptical Thoughts on Jane Austen and Film" effectively voices this skepticism about the limits of film productions, and Jan Fergus in "Two *Mansfield Parks*: Purist and Postmodern" compares the 1983 and 1999 versions of *Mansfield Park*, seeking a formula for "purist" productions, ones that come as close as the film medium can to Austen's novelistic intent. Paulette Richards, in turn, in "Regency Romance Shadowing in the Visual Motifs of Roger Michell's *Persuasion*," finds film misrepresenting Austen, employing Regency romance conventions to make Austen familiar and even comprehensible to a mass audience. However, the remaining contributors argue forcefully that, whether or not the film versions of Austen's novels truly reflect her authentic world and vision, they are exciting and intriguing artistic works themselves, employing intertextuality and blending the commercial and the literary into a composite creative vision encompassing rich visual and aural experiences.

Herein, then, lies the "controversy" of which Corrigan spoke. Harriet Margolis in "Janeite Culture: What Does the Name 'Jane Austen' Authorize?" and Jocelyn Harris in "'Such a Transformation!' Translation, Imitation, and Intertextuality in Jane Austen On Screen" provide quite different but thoroughly informed takes on the controversy, raising and exploring the significant issues of translation versus imitation, problematic reader/viewer response, intertextuality, the profit motive, and exchange-value ethics. The chapters which follow extend the controversy in highly specific contexts. Penny Gay's "*Sense and Sensibility* in a Post-feminist World: Sisterhood is Still Powerful" and Tara Wallace's "Filming Romance: *Persuasion*" counter Jan Fergus's purist plea with a challenge for filmmakers to find the visual language and a reading of the original that will speak to modern viewing audiences. Agreeing with Gay and Wallace

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79325-4 - Jane Austen on Screen

Edited by Gina MacDonald and Andrew MacDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald*

that the filming of Austen's novels is subject to the fashions of our time and that the process of adaptation demands a recognition of the historical distance between the original text and its new audience, Ellen Belton, in "Reimagining Jane Austen: The 1940 and 1995 Film Versions of *Pride and Prejudice*," explores the role of audience, culture, and time in affecting the celluloid vision. In "Emma, Interrupted: Speaking Jane Austen in Fiction and Film" Hilary Schor explores the change in narrative voices in the move from novel to screen, but finds Douglas McGrath's *Emma* to a surprising degree capturing the complexity of subjectivity and realism Austen's text (and narrative voices) provide to its canniest readers, leaving them, as does the novel, unsure of what they are hearing, caught up in the complexity of contradictory, interactive voices with several dimensions of meaning. In short, Schor's audacious claim is that a commercial filmmaker has successfully duplicated the rich experience of literature. David Monaghan, in "*Emma* and the Art of Adaptation," is less impressed by McGrath's *Emma* but also takes on the literary purists. Arguing against adaptations of Austen's novels made according to the conventions of the BBC classic drama house style, he defends the ITV/A&E *Emma* and *Clueless* as creative endeavors, new works of art that enrich appreciation and understanding of their source text.

This text begins with a contrarian pronouncement by Roger Gard, who argues a traditionalist position; it ends with a contrarian manifesto. John Mosier's "Clues for the Clueless" turns the controversy on its head, taking on both purists and their opposite numbers. Mosier looks back to European scholarly traditions to undercut the negativism of traditionalists with his assertion that "the primary objective of good adaptation, like that of any good interpretative reading of a text, is to make us go back to the text and reconsider it anew": filmmakers are simply doing what critics do, but in a more creative form. However, when he asserts that a basic measure used to evaluate an adaptation is the extent to which the filmmaker seems to understand the author, he distinguishes between fidelity to text and understanding, noting that a film can be faithful to the details and totally empty of the author's wit, irony, satire, and meaning. Authorial intention thus rears its shaggy head. Finally, when Mosier measures modern productions by whether the film is any good as film, or whether its interest is completely a function of its relation to the text, he finds all of the film productions of Austen wanting, except the two most on the periphery, *Clueless* and *Mansfield Park* (1999), and of these two, only *Clueless* is deemed both faithful to the spirit of Austen and good as a film, in and of itself.

The controversy over how to convert any piece of literature to a screenplay and then a film is an engaging one for scholars interested in the uniqueness of different media and the variety of ways available to artists

to express their ideas. Andrew Davies, screenwriter of the 1996 ITV/A&E *Emma*, believes adaptations of Jane Austen require great restraint. “You can’t change the actual story,” he asserts. Despite this purist attitude, he admits that the scriptwriter must take “a certain amount of liberty,” justifying this presumption as filling in “little gaps,” especially where there are “hidden scenes . . . that Austen didn’t get around to writing herself.”<sup>4</sup> Here is authorial intention again: we know what she meant, so let’s do it better than she did. Since the film must be coherent to communicate successfully with a mass audience, improvising with the original materials is required. Roger Michell, director of *Persuasion*, went further than filling in “little gaps”; lacking a unifying thematic middle, he found the center of his understanding of *Persuasion* in an age-old theme: “It’s a Cinderella story,” he asserts. “It’s boy meets girl. Girl loses boy. Boy finds girl.”<sup>5</sup> For director Ang Lee, the secret to a unified vision of *Sense and Sensibility* was his discovery of Jane Austen as “a wonderful painter of family rituals and social customs.” Seeing in Austen’s work qualities which he has tried to achieve in his own work enabled him to depict *Sense and Sensibility* as a combination of “warmhearted romance and drama with a sense of social satire.” “Sense and sensibility, pride and prejudice, eat drink man woman – I like . . . getting to the bottom of life itself!” says Lee.<sup>6</sup> Where, we might be forgiven for asking, is Jane Austen in all this? We have come very close to the position screenwriter Bill Wittliff attributes to Texas writer J. Frank Dobie: “Every story belongs to whoever can tell it best.”<sup>7</sup>

In a diametrically opposed fashion, Emma Thompson found the novel *Sense and Sensibility* “so complex” and so full of so many different stories “that bashing out a structure was the biggest labour.” She reports that she would write a version which producer Lindsay Doran would then read; then either he would send her notes or they would “sit down together and talk out the problems.” After crying for a while, she would then go back to work – a pattern repeated for three years. Ultimately, her approach was to find a thematic center that would provide a unity to the materials, in this case, the question of economic survival:

We plunge into their [the Dashwoods’] stories at a time when the whole question of survival is entering their lives because they don’t have any money. When their father dies and they lose the family estate at Norland, they are edging towards the abyss of genteel poverty. If something happens and they lose what little they do have, there’s nothing at all to fall back on, except the kindness of relations – an unreliable business at best. The whole question of finding somebody to marry becomes a great deal more essential to their financial and social survival.<sup>8</sup>

Thompson’s approach was clearly most respectful of Austen’s intention, but whether it produced a better end result than more cavalier improvisation we will leave to our contributors to sort out.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79325-4 - Jane Austen on Screen

Edited by Gina MacDonald and Andrew MacDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald*

While screenwriters fret about character and coherence, some directors and producers obsess over details. Sue Birtwistle, producer of film versions of both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, compares filming a period drama to marshaling “a battle campaign,” with all its potential for chaos and disaster.<sup>9</sup> Lindsay Doran, the producer of *Sense and Sensibility*, claims to have searched ten years to find a screenwriter who could translate Austen’s combination of satire and romance equally well to the screen; Doran is tormented about being “true to the period,” and worries, for example, that a beautiful little yellow flower in a scene with Emma Thompson and Hugh Grant riding horses “wasn’t introduced into England until 1879,” not really a problem of much literary moment.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Diarmuid Lawrence, director of the 1996 ITV/A&E *Emma*, sees his job as a practical one: how to create the illusion of weather, season, and crowds:

If it’s a blue sky, we can make it look autumnal, it’s not really a problem. To make snow, we use a mixture of salt and foam. The foam is a bit of a problem when you run carriages over it, because it just comes up like soap bubbles. [In carriage scenes] you can’t get as many people as you’d like in [the scene]. I find myself running along beside the coach trying to watch the actors.<sup>11</sup>

The many specialists involved in adapting a literary work to the screen have widely divergent agendas, not all of them aesthetic, literary, or intellectual. The cinema, as many of our contributors stress, is a collaborative medium, as complex in its teamwork as a symphony orchestra or an operatic production; what is seen by the audience is only a small part of the enterprise.

Novelist and screenwriter Hugh Selby, Jr., when asked how difficult it was to turn his novel *Requiem for a Dream* into a screenplay, replied that a screenwriter has to simply accept limits, as if doing a translation into a new language: screenwriters should try to get to the “essence” of the source text and amputate everything else. “This simply comes with the screenwriting territory,” says Selby. In fact, the process of translating novel to screen necessitates “amputating” the book so much that most authors can’t cope and admirers of the book feel that too much has been lost in the shift in medium. By its nature, says Selby, a screen treatment is an exterior or “voyeur” experience, and as a result much depiction of inner life must be cast aside. Besides, he goes on to note, there is something ineffable in the language of a good book, in the unspoken voice of the writer, something that cannot be carried onto the screen. Selby advises putting the goal of making a good film first and forgetting about being “true” to a literary text. Being true to the heart of the work, its essence, is, to him, of far more importance and value.<sup>12</sup>

By this definition of scriptwriting, Amy Heckerling's script for *Clueless* does what all good scripts should do, provide broad opportunities for actors, directors, set decorators, costume designers – the whole cast and crew – to realize a modern vision of Austen's original story. Heckerling sets up a surprisingly parallel milieu, develops a character that is both the object of satire and of sympathy, and then draws on parallels of plot, with the similarity in plot events relatively less important than the parallel settings – privileged and isolated worlds obsessed with status and manners – and parallel characters – immature young women moving from self-love to a more mature awareness of others. Heckerling looked back to *Emma* to find the present and to argue that the human condition, especially that of young people entering adult society, does not change. Yet, she evokes and satirizes every cliché of youthful California life. The power and staying power of *Clueless* comes from Heckerling's sense that people and place matter, that character and situation are meaningful. This intuitive and creative approach to translating literature to film is in direct contrast to the more historically respectful, restrained BBC productions that attempt a reconstruction of Austen's time and place. What is gained by a creative parallel is a new work of art, one resonant of an early masterpiece, yet one which retains its own character. Once again, however, we must ask: where is Jane Austen in this fresh milieu?

A source novel and film can echo back and forth in a satisfying way, their intertextual relationship reminding us of virtues in each medium that might remain unnoticed otherwise. The intimacy of Austen's narrative voice and of our recreation of her characters in the private theaters of our minds are not necessarily violated by seeing the collaborative visions of talented artists on screen: their Jane Austen may not be ours, but may speak to us nevertheless. We agree with John Mosier's dictum that a good adaptation should take us back to the original work – what more could we ask from a couple of hours of entertainment than to be reintroduced to past pleasures with a new perspective?

## NOTES

- 1 Timothy Corrigan, *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999): 1.
- 2 *Tom Jones*, Writers Henry Fielding and John Osborne, Director Tony Richardson. United Artists, 1963.
- 3 *Castaway*, Writer William Broyles, Jr., Director Robert Zemeckis. Twentieth Century Fox, 2000.
- 4 David Goldman, "Jane Austen's *Emma*: Meet the Production Team" (1996): [www.pemberley.com/janeausten](http://www.pemberley.com/janeausten)
- 5 "Lindsay Duran [*sic*]" at [www.archive.salon.com](http://www.archive.salon.com)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79325-4 - Jane Austen on Screen

Edited by Gina MacDonald and Andrew MacDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

8 *Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald*

6 Ibid.

7 Personal communication, 2000.

8 Emma Thompson, *The "Sense and Sensibility" Screenplay and Diaries: Bringing Jane Austen's Novel to Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995).

9 "Lindsay Duran."

10 Ibid.

11 Goldman, "Meet the Team."

12 Personal communication, 2000.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-79325-4 - Jane Austen on Screen

Edited by Gina MacDonald and Andrew MacDonald

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1 Short “takes” on Austen: summarizing the controversy between literary purists and film enthusiasts

---

The following three short essays briefly and clearly establish the boundaries of the academic argument over Jane Austen’s novels made into film, with Professor Roger Gard taking the conservative, or purist, position, with New Zealand filmmaker and scriptwriter Gaylene Preston taking the liberal, film community position, and with Kate Bowles looking to the future and the ways in which technology will change our relationship to Jane Austen, the historical figure, and her works, which speak to us today in ways Austen never imagined. The longer essays which comprise this text explore these broad questions, answering them through the case studies of individual novels and the film productions associated with them.

Roger Gard’s eloquent defense of the uniqueness of literary experience is both dismissive of film’s claims – the “artistic paucity of mere looking” at surfaces – and systematic in enumerating the special gifts of prose – at creating subtlety and perspective, psychological deftness, irony, and a sense of context in time. Gard articulates what most impassioned readers feel after viewing a screen version of a favorite work; appearances may be wonderfully particularized (though at a great loss to imagination and variety), plot may be dutifully unfolded in basic outline, but the essence of what makes the work worthy is lost, or at least, sadly depleted. Professor Gard’s stout defense will stand for one pole in the discussions which follow, the high ground of literary sensibility, which many feel can only be approached, not occupied, by cinema.

As a filmmaker, Gaylene Preston speaks of Jane Austen finding the characters “directly living and breathing” in the director’s “framed images.” The artistic perspective is that of the theater rather than of the literary experience, the prose exposition. This stance is a defensible position given Austen’s frequently remarked-on theatricality, her palpable “voice,” and even the historical fact of her domestic “shows.” As in great pictorial art, exteriors capture inner states; the heart of the matter inhabits the look of people and things. Film captures these surfaces perfectly, even controlling the “thespian posturing” of the boards.

Kate Bowles asks a question for the future: will networked communication change everything, including our roles as readers and viewers of literature and film? (The question has been asked before about other presumed paradigm shifts, usually with muddled answers.) The Internet negates the passivity of “audience,” creating participatory, egalitarian connections between “art” and “consumers”; while, as Roger Gard argues, film may dilute the essence of a text down to mass-culture tastes, shared electronic dissemination creates a new beast entirely. As Bowles perceptively points out, fandom challenges even the commercialization that has long been the ultimate literary rebuke of the movies. Fandom is hardly new, existing in recognizable forms in Austen’s time – will the Internet empower it and transform its progenitors?

### **A few skeptical thoughts on Jane Austen and film**

*Roger Gard*

The tremendous success the camera has with appearances can be a great asset – for instance, in giving instantaneous and powerful landscapes, and so on, in place of lengthy Walter Scott-style descriptions – but this asset, even in simple storytelling – let alone the intertwined narratives of complex souls – is limited and can distort. It is so difficult not to be bowled over by the glamor and instant apparent reality of vivid shots of striking people in beautiful places (or ugly ones for that matter) that the artistic paucity of mere looking is too easily forgotten.

Of course, films also use music to suggest, direct, and enhance emotion, often quite potently; and dialogue can be lifted straight from the text to specify dramatically. But any filmmaker will quickly tell you that the camera is King.

The crucial difficulty lies in this camera’s inability to discriminate easily and swiftly within a given appearance. Because of this, the adaptation of subtler effects is very hard to achieve. Moreover, the possible advantages of a camera-enforced objectivity are duly paid for by the difficulties of establishing a particular point of view. The camera has no narrative voice.

These drawbacks are felt to be particularly acute, and damaging, when one considers the clumsiness of psychological notation in anything other than words. Not only in famous direct insights such as, “It darted through her with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!” (*Emma*: III.xi) – how do you film that? – but in all those glittering pages of strong and delicate exposition through free indirect speech, a resource so brilliantly developed by Jane Austen.